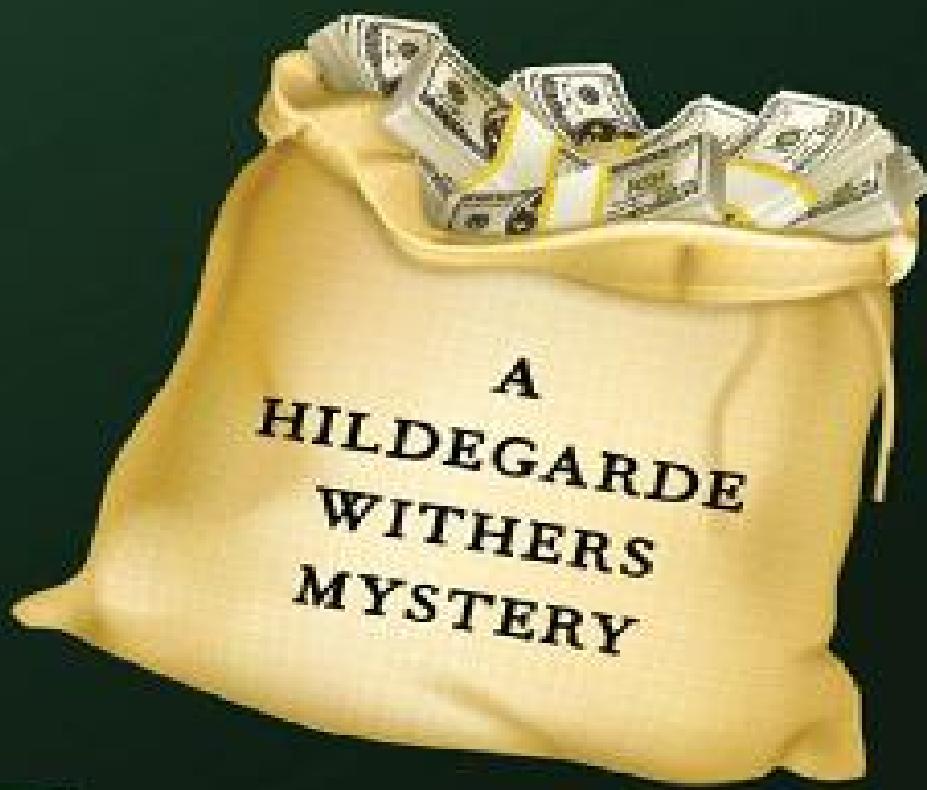


A MYSTEROUSPRESS.COM BOOK



# STUART PALMER



## Four Lost Ladies



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**Four Lost Ladies**  
**A Hildegarde Withers Mystery**

**Stuart Palmer**



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*“A bad dress rehearsal means a good opening.”*

—Broadway proverb

# 1

ALL THAT AFTERNOON HARRIET Bascom killed time in her hotel suite, nursing her wrath to keep it warm. She started to dress long before it was necessary, arraying herself in courage and confidence as she slipped into the underthings trimmed with contrasting Chantilly lace, the sheerest of dark flattering nylons, the simple black pumps which had cost her more than what had once been a month's pay, and finally the bustled, daringly décolleté gown with the Paris label. They were her armor.

While she dressed, her mind was busy rehearsing. It was desperately important that she start off the scene in just the right key. He must be put immediately on the defensive. Keep jabbing, keep him off balance, as they shouted at the prize fights. Only it was altogether another sort of arena that Harriet visualized—the *Plaza de Toros* which had so shocked and excited her on that all-expense trip to Mexico City a few years ago. The bull had entered charging and stamping in hot masculine pride, wasted his strength in futile passes at swirling, empty silk, begun to feel the barbs in his shoulders and then finally had suffered the thrust of the matador's delicate crooked sword in what the Spanish so poetically called “The Moment of Truth.”

Harriet practiced her opening speech over and over, with variations. Should she be devastatingly aloof, with the faintest undercurrent of bitterness? When he came in the door, holding out his arms, she could slide elusively away. “*Please!* My dear boy, there's a time and a place for everything! But I think that now we should have a little talk about some of the eternal verities, you and I.” Something like Tallulah Bankhead the other night in the play, or perhaps Gertrude Lawrence.

Or she could have cocktails sent up ahead of time from the Platinum Lounge downstairs, ready and waiting for him. Give him a warm Judas-kiss (fair exchange) and then as he sipped the sweet iced fire, comfortable and relaxed and smug, she could let him have the blow right between the eyes. “By the way, my dear, you're not such a very good liar! Did you really think you were fooling me with your pretty fictions the other night? I

happen to know everything, do you understand, *everything!*” Only perhaps that sounded just a little like a radio serial.

Harriet was determined that since the scene must take place, it must happen in a manner worthy of her new personality, her new wardrobe, and the new setting. As a woman of the world she must dominate the delicately shaded moment. Some things wouldn’t have to be put into words at all, but could be expressed with a glance, a subtle shrug of bare shoulders.

Only he must be kept in suspense as long as possible, to stretch out his punishment. Then at just the right moment she would tell him what she had discovered, and watch him sweat and fumble and wriggle like the worm he was.

“I’m really dreadfully sorry, but I’m breaking our date for tonight.” If she used this gambit she could wear the lovely silvery-blue stole of mutation mink, as if all ready to leave and only waiting to tell him off. “I happen to have another engagement—just meeting some literary people at Twenty-One, you wouldn’t know them—but I wanted first to tell you that I just happened to find out today what a stinking lousy cheat and liar you are, you *stinking, lousy*—” Stop Harriet, stop right there! Your voice is getting out of control and your lips are trembling.

No, no, the crying was all over and done with. That had been for this morning, after the long-distance call to Santa Barbara on the other edge of the continent, and the bursting of the rainbow bubble. Harriet had said a meek “Thank you” and hung up the receiver and then flung herself down on the satin bedspread and pounded the silk pillowcases with clenched fists, howling and screaming like a hysterical child. But she wasn’t a child; she was an attractive, slightly overweight woman who looked twenty-four or so by candlelight and all of her thirty-nine years in the cold glare of morning, and she had been disappointed in love a number of times before this.

Only the other blows hadn’t struck below the belt. Normally, the world being what it is, a woman of her years does not retain a belief in magic and Santa Claus and fairy godmothers, but the miraculous events of the past month had almost forced her to go back and become all starry-eyed again. She had of course read in the papers about wonderful things happening to quite ordinary people. Oil wells bubbled up black wealth in their back yards, or the phone rang one night and it turned out to be some radio program offering untold riches for just guessing the tune of some old ballad

or the name of George Washington's wife (they let you win if you said Mrs. George Washington) or else the blue-eyed curvaceous daughter of a Lithuanian coal miner found favor in the jaded eyes of a billionaire's grandson and a few weeks later was aboard his yacht, with a wedding ring and a big toothy smile for the cameras.

She had never dreamed of anything like that happening to her. And then on the fifth of the month (numerologists had always said five was her number) came the news of the little legacy from an uncle of her dead father's up in Canada, and when all taxes and deductions were taken out of it there was still something over \$700. A librarian without family ties, whose school friends have all married or drifted away, free of debts or real vices, can either do very little or a great deal with that amount of money. It seemed to Harriet to be too much to fritter away and too little to put away in investments.

A gallant gesture was the thing. So, feeling light-headed and a little devilish, she had let the rental library go hang one Saturday afternoon and taken the bus over to Saratoga. Serenely indifferent to racing forms and tip sheets, Harriet had played post-position Five all afternoon, craftily doubling her bets when it lost. When the fourth race ended she had nearly \$1,500 crammed into her handbag, and she could no more have resisted putting it on number Five in the fifth race than she could have run the ten furlongs in 2:02 2/5, which was the time established by Little Nipper, a previously overlooked four-year-old who happened to wear the numeral 5 on his saddle-cloth. In making this surprising effort the gallant gelding broke his maiden, the track record, and a great many cash customers who had bet the favorite at one to two. If it had not been for Harriet's big last-minute wager the mutuel price would have been fantastic, but even as it was the winner paid off at better than twelve-to-one.

When the man at the cashier's window painstakingly counted out Harriet's \$18,240 he congratulated her and kidded with her much more than seemed absolutely necessary. She leaped to the natural but mistaken conclusion that he was just being fresh and trying to date her up, so she seized her money and scooted for the Ladies Lounge before he could get one of his mates to tip off the internal revenue men.

The cashier was sure that the plump little woman in the gray suit and the hat with the wilted flower would show up at the hundred-dollar window

on the Sellers' side before post-time for the sixth, but he was wrong.

There was a canny streak in Hattie Bascom that cropped up at odd times. Before the trumpeter had blown *Boots and Saddles* to call the thoroughbreds out on the track for the next race, she was bouncing homeward on the bus, sick at her stomach with ecstasy. She kept money and secret both close to her heart, having a not unreasonable fear that the income-tax people or somebody would want to cut in on her fortune. It was hers and hers alone, and she was going to use it as a bridge to Paradise. On Monday she quit her job, cut all the ties that bound her to Poughkeepsie, and enplaned for New York carrying the money and all her worldly possessions in a big battered cowhide valise that had been her father's.

Like the peach and cherry trees which sometimes burst unseasonably into bloom during the false warmth of Indian summer, Harriet blossomed. Her first base of operations had been a small room at the Barbizon, soon overflowing with the loot she lugged home from delirious hours of shopping. She chose only the best of everything—or at least the best-advertised and most expensive. With the recklessness of a little girl let loose in a candy store she hastened to make herself acquainted with the sacred names that up until now she had only glimpsed from afar in the full-page ads of the thick, expensive magazines—the ads composed in a strange language where dresses were *creations*, *caprices*, *silhouettes*, *whimsies*, and even *tours de force*, underwear became *exquisites*, and hats and gloves and shoes were *accents*.

Once she had her wardrobe and enough shiny new luggage to hold it, she moved to a suite at the new Hotel Grandee, two lovely big rooms high in the tower above Park Avenue, and then the shopping spree went into its second phase. There appeared a tiny watch set in a bracelet of diamonds, costume jewelry that looked more real than real, and even a few old-fashioned bits to suggest background. There were the big velvet-topped boxes of French liqueur chocolates, the Napoleon brandy that she kept in an antique silver-filigree flask, fresh orchids sent daily to her rooms, and best of all the dozens of imported perfumes in bottles shaped like torsos and crowns and jewels and animals and everything in the world except bottles.

It would all of course have palled very swiftly on Harriet without an audience, without masculine eyes to appreciate, a masculine nose to sniff, masculine hands to touch. But that too had been added unto her. She had

parlayed the tiny inheritance into everything in the world she had ever wanted, and that included a lover and a proposal. She had been glad rather than sorry that they had not been introduced in the ordinary way, because in almost all the romantic films she had seen, in the magazine stories too, the boy and girl had met unconventionally. In the classic Hollywood phrase, "They meet cute."

It was all wonderful and inevitable. She had decided at once to call him "Gavin" because according to numerology that matched hers so beautifully. But names really didn't matter. He was so utterly, so perfectly *right*, so suitable for a husband and lover in spite of the age difference, so masculine and dependable and real. Harriet saw the rest of her life as a rosy dream, wherein she floated hand in hand with Gavin, turning to let him kiss her now and then against a background of Sun Valley ski-tows or Meadow Brook polo.

Only in the mornings did she ever have any pawky little doubts in the back of her mind—this morning particularly, because of the hang-over from the champagne. Something had impelled her to make that long-distance call, though she hated herself a little for doing it. And now—

Now she felt as might Sir Galahad if he had found the Holy Grail only brass after all, with *Made in Japan* stamped on the bottom.

He would pay for that, through the nose. He would suffer ten times over for every single moment that Harriet had spent this morning crying and wailing and bemoaning her fate. Because now she was herself again. A phrase came to her out of the past, from the days of her brief whirl at college when undergraduates still read Mencken and Cabell and Huneker out loud to each other. It was something about there being a strange magic in the woman who is mistress of herself, the moment, and the man.

Without in the least realizing it, Harriet Bascom took her ideas from things she had read, just as she took her tastes in package form from the advertisements. Now she repeated the words again, looking critically into the mirror over the dressing-table. Thanks to her natural buoyancy, and to the hours spent in the Cathedral de Beauté down in the mezzanine, this morning's avalanche of emotion had passed without leaving a trace. In fact, her face looked becomingly pale and interesting. Harriet practiced expressions before the glass, and found several that she must remember to use.

As for the rest of it, there was nothing much more that she could do to make the setting perfect. The luxuriously furnished rooms with their blond wood and pistachio and rose-red upholstery held just a few touches of her own personality—a few new bright-jacketed books that she'd dipped into enough to discuss, a couple of framed impressionist prints above the divan, a great vase of crimson-black Nigrette hybrid tea-roses, the portable automatic radio-phonograph in its alligator case.

For mood-music she chose Erik Satie's odd *Pieces in the Form of a Pear*, and set it ready on the turntable. Now the stage was completely set, the lights almost as soft and flattering as candles. She decided not to worry any more about what to say; she would have to find just the right words when the time came. The big scene would go off as she planned. Even now she didn't dare to think about the curtain.

At a quarter of seven she ordered cocktails sent up in a shaker from downstairs, on a tray with one glass because she wanted to make it clear that she wasn't drinking with him. That would be another psychological advantage.

The bellboy fought hard to live up to his rigorous training when he entered with the tray, but he could not resist a flash of appreciation when he saw her in the topless crimson, clinging gown that accentuated her generous curves in just the right places. The look in his eyes was something that Harriet needed very much at the moment; reassurance from a man, especially a young man, went to her head like wine. She could not resist tipping him five dollars.

"Gee, thank you, Miss Bascom!" he said fervently, and might have said more had she not turned casually away to start the music, keeping the volume turned 'way down. After the door closed she looked longingly at the cocktails. Then she went into the bedroom and took a good pull at the flask of brandy. Not of course that she needed it.

At ten minutes past seven—trust him to be just that late and no later—there was a knock at the door. Harriet took a quick last look in the mirror and then set her face in the proud, enigmatic smile that she liked best. Then she let him in. It added somehow to her annoyance that in spite of her hints about full-dress tonight, he was still only wearing black-tie.

It was the first time he had been in her rooms—somehow before this they had always met in some convenient cocktail lounge—but he had eyes

only for her. They kissed, and then with a conscious effort she twisted out of his arms.

“Daiquiri?”

He just stood there, looking at her curiously. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Why—why nothing at all. My dear boy, there’s a time and a place for everything. But I think that now we should have a little talk, you and I—”

“Answer me!”

She tried again: “By the way, my dear, did you really think you were fooling me?”

“Harriet, I said, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ and I mean to have an answer.” Her name sounded strange on his lips, for like most lovers who have spent their hours together without other people around, there had never been need for anything but “you” or “darling.” Nor had she ever before felt this whiplash in his voice.

“I’m sorry,” she went on breathlessly, “but you see I have another engagement, I mean some literary friends are picking me up at Twenty-One, you wouldn’t know them, and I—” The rest of it died in her throat, for he wasn’t listening. He had put the black hat back on his head, as if he didn’t realize where he was or else didn’t care. Now he was putting on his gloves again. He was going to walk out on her, that was what he was going to do, leaving her with everything pent-up inside, everything unspoken. So Harriet took a deep breath and blurted, “All right! I know all about you, that’s what’s wrong! You lousy, stinking cheat and liar—you *fake*!”

Then she saw the look in his eyes—no, somehow she saw through his eyes as if they were windows opening into the murky horror that was his mind. Harriet was still stiffly holding out her arm to offer him the cocktail, though a moment ago the glass had dropped unnoticed to shatter on the floor.

Now he was coming toward her. And suddenly all her armor was gone, the courage and self-assurance were stripped from Harriet, melted like Cellophane before the flames of his eyes. She was naked and helpless, she was just foolish, gullible Hattie Bascom trapped in a hotel room with a man she had loved but never known until this moment. The Moment of Truth.

There was no use to scream, no use at all. One of the proudest boasts of the Grandee was that its thousand rooms were all of completely

soundproof construction, so that no guest could ever be troubled by the sound of radio or piano or late party. She could shriek until she was blue in the face, but nobody would hear her. Nobody but the man she called Gavin, the man who blocked her way to the door, to the phone.

And always, Harriet realized sickeningly, up until this moment she had been counting somehow on his having an explanation, an excuse that she could accept. She had always expected that she could eventually forgive him for his lies, had visualized a scene where after a long, delicious interval of suspense he would kneel crying beside her, begging another chance and saying that he could not live without her. So they would be back together again, closer than ever. And she would have her dream, almost as good as new.

But now with all defenses gone the illusions were stripped away from her too. She had never been a woman of the world, she had never belonged here in this setting. She was only Hattie Bascom from Poughkeepsie, a lonely, love-starved librarian trying to pretend to herself that the man she had let pick her up in a cocktail bar was Prince Charming on a white steed.

“Why are you afraid of me,” he was saying to her, in a voice that was only a hoarse whisper. It startled Harriet out of the paralysis that had held her helpless for those few interminable moments, and sanity came back with a rush. After all, it wasn’t as if she were alone with him in the jungle or on a desert island. She was in the midst of the largest city in the world, in a hotel with a thousand rooms filled with people who would rush to help her. She had only to raise the window and call.

Harriet turned and ran to the nearest window, tugged at it savagely, and finally raised it to the top. He was very close to her now, but he made no move to prevent her. He only said, “Poor Harriet!” and she felt the warmth of his cheek on her naked shoulder, his arm at her waist. Betrayed by her own body, her own nerves, she felt a rush of blind unreasoning relief sweep over her. She relaxed limply in his arms, eyes closed, lips waiting with parched impatience for the kiss that would make an end of their first quarrel and give her back her soap-bubble dream again.

*“Out of sight ... out of mind.”*

—Thomas à Kempis.

## 2

BY THIS TIME INSPECTOR OSCAR PIPER was resigned to the fact that a policeman's lot is not a happy one. Moreover it seemed to the grizzled little Irishman that nowadays he was continually running into added proof that things weren't what they used to be. Except Manhattan's climate, of course. For the second straight day snow was falling heavily upon the city, great soft flakes that threatened to surpass the blizzard of '47, and as usual during storms the crime index had taken a sharp rise.

Just to add to his burdens he found himself forced into the rocky and unfamiliar paths of literary endeavor, and had spent most of the afternoon composing on his ancient upright a memorandum which began: *Departmental Bureaus, Realignment of, Objections Thereto* in various equally unsatisfactory versions. By six o'clock, when the Homicide Bureau was quieting down for the day, he was rattling along at a great rate. Then the whirlwind struck.

The door of his sanctum-sanctorum burst open and in sailed an angular figure in a damp blue cape, carrying a dripping umbrella and crowned with a headpiece which resembled a model of Bikini Island complete with palm trees, just after the detonation of the atomic bomb.

"Oh, *no!*" he cried, wincing like a startled leprechaun. "Take it away—the hat, I mean. It *is* a hat, isn't it?"

Miss Hildegarde Withers sniffed disdainfully. "I suppose you're annoyed because I'm late, but in this weather—"

"*Late?*" He looked blank.

"Surely you haven't forgotten that we're having a bite to eat together and then going to hear the Don Cossack Chorus at Carnegie Hall?"

"Why—why of course not! It's right here on my desk-pad." He dug down beneath several layers of discarded memoranda, and showed her the note. "Be with you in a jiffy, just let me finish this thing—it's got to get over to the Commissioner's office first thing in the morning."

"Of course." The maiden schoolteacher perched herself in a chair, watching while he hammered out the last paragraph, signed his name, and

stuffed the memo in a big brown envelope. Then she cocked her head and asked, "Been busy, Oscar?"

"Yes and no. A lot of homicides reported, but all dull routine stuff that can be just as well handled by the precinct men and usually is. 'Two blockheads to kill and be killed—'"

"Why, you've taken up *reading*!" she gasped.

"Now and then, though I don't let it get generally known through the Department. Shall we go?" He grabbed his hat and coat. "I know a little place over on Broome Street where they dish a pretty fair plate of minestrone."

The oddly assorted couple came out into the storm, facing into the feathery flakes that poured endlessly down. They walked on for several blocks, and then the Inspector turned toward her. "You're very quiet tonight—for you."

"I was thinking," said the schoolteacher. "About the snowflakes. Oscar, isn't it a little frightening to realize that a human being can slip away like one of these snowflakes, to disappear forever?"

"Judas priest in a bathtub!" the Inspector exploded. "What makes you think they disappear? They pile up in the streets and cost the City millions of dollars to haul away. Those snowflakes you're talking about are practically indestructible!"

"You know what I mean," she told him.

"I do not," said Piper. "But you can tell me—after we've ordered. Here's the place, watch yourself on those steps."

They came into a dark, steamy little basement, fragrant with the odors of spices and olive oil and Chianti, and managed to tuck themselves into a vacant booth in the rear. Miss Withers barely looked at the menu. "You order," she said. "Anything at all."

"Okay, what is this?" he demanded when the waiter had left them. "What's biting you?"

"I was thinking of the line from Burns," she said. "'Or like the snow falls in the river, a moment white, then gone forever.'" Miss Withers began absently to fold and refold her napkin. "Oscar, do you happen to know just how many lonely, middle-aged, unattached women disappear right here in this city every year?"

"Not nearly enough," Piper answered promptly.

She let that one go by. "More than three thousand, according to recent estimates by the YWCA and the Travelers Aid Society."

"Why don't you drop down to Centre Street tomorrow morning and break the news to Missing Persons? Tell Captain Mastik I sent you."

She sniffed. "I might have known you'd say that. But there's a possibility that you, as head of Homicide, should be interested. Isn't it more than likely that some of those who drop out of sight are victims of foul play, only because they haven't any influence—?"

Now the Inspector had to grin. "So who *has* influence when they're dead?"

"You know very well what I mean. They haven't importance enough to be missed, they haven't any close friends or near relatives, so nothing is ever done about it."

He put a bread-stick in his mouth and chewed it as if it had been one of his favorite panatelas. "Relax, Hildegarde. Why do you always have to go around appointing yourself a citizens' committee of one? Believe me, we make quite a commotion down at Centre Street when a dead body shows up under suspicious circumstances. Only we don't get three thousand unidentified female stiffnesses in the city morgues in the course of a year—no, nor a tenth that number. Almost all the ones we do get are victims of accident, disease, or suicide. No, you're barking up the wrong tree again. Those women you're so worried about, they probably just got bored with the big city and went home. Or else they wanted to skip out on a husband or boy-friend, or beat some bills."

Miss Withers shook her head. "It would be a different thing, wouldn't it, if three thousand children disappeared? It happened over in Hamelin, Germany, long ago and they're still talking about it. Yet think—each of those missing women was a child once, somebody's fair-headed baby daughter!"

But trying to get the Inspector excited about statistics was uphill going at the best of times. "Look, Hildegarde, as an old friend and admirer I advise you to quit worrying your head about all this. Stick to your three R's and your goldfish."

"They were *tropical* fish," she corrected indignantly. "And I finally had to give them up. Also you know very well that I retired from teaching

when the spring term ended, though I do substitute sometimes when somebody is ill. But—”

“But there isn’t really very much for a retired schoolma’am to do with herself, is that it?” The Inspector’s voice was for him surprisingly gentle. “There haven’t been any important murder cases for you to kibitz on like you used to, so you’re trying to drum up trade.”

“What would you expect me to do, sit home and crochet?”

He shook his head. “Hildegarde, I’ve got to hand it to you. You’re unique. The guides on the rubberneck busses ought to point you out as a landmark, the way they do Grant’s Tomb and Radio City. See the woman who wanted to solve three thousand murders all at once! But seriously, down at the Department we’re realistic. We have to start from autopsies and reports and complaints and things like that. Now if we had a nice fresh corpse—”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she promised him tartly. Unfortunately, at the moment, she had no premonition whatever of how close one of these days that dead body would come to being her own.

“Just as a personal favor,” he begged, “don’t come around Headquarters throwing monkey wrenches. This is no time to go stirring up trouble. We’ve got enough. I’ll be blamed for any toes you step on, and they’re out to nail my hide to the barn door as it is. Reorganization is being discussed again—there’s a new assistant-commissioner, you know—and Homicide is the only bureau in the Department to have an inspector in charge; all the rest get along with a captain.”

“Mercy, Oscar! They’re not actually trying to demote you?”

He hesitated. “Something like that. Maybe it will blow over; it has before.”

“I hope so. Of course I wouldn’t for the world do anything that would add to your troubles, unless I felt it my bounden duty. All the same—”

Then the soup arrived. “Thanks,” said the Inspector. “I knew you’d see it my way. As for this wild idea of yours, remember that while once in a blue moon a Tufverson case comes along, as a rule people don’t get murdered without a corpse being left around.”

“Yes, I know. Physicists say that matter is indestructible. And I’ve also heard somewhere that when you drop a stone into a body of water the ripples go out widening and diminishing forever.”

“You can’t see ‘em, so what’s the difference? Eat your soup.”

“There are stars, Oscar, too far away for us to see with the naked eye, but we can measure the heat they give. When a person drops out of sight, like a stone in water, it must start ripples of another sort, ripples invisible and yet—”

“Crackers?”

“What? Oh, no, thank you. Oscar, you must excuse me. I just happened to think of something. You’ll have to hear the Chorus by yourself—I must rush home at once.” She was scrambling to her feet.

“But *why*?” He stared at her, open-mouthed.

“Every single Christmas card I received this year is standing on the mantel above my fireplace, and—” Gloves, bag, and umbrella in her hand, the schoolteacher was already hurrying out of the place.

The Inspector started to rise, and then sank back into his seat. He sighed and shook his head. Since their first meeting beside a corpse in the penguin pool of the old Aquarium, more years ago than he liked to remember, an odd friendship had existed between the professional policeman and the eccentric, irrepressible schoolma’am. The bond had deepened in spite of—or perhaps because of—a series of sparring-matches between them, with no holds barred and with honors to date about even.

But snowflakes! Murder victims by the thousand, ripples that rippled on forever, and finally the old girl rushing off in a dither because she’d left her old Christmas cards, the most useless objects known to man, unguarded on the mantel. *I hate to admit it*, Piper said to himself, *but she’s slipping fast*. A little sadly, he settled down to the job of finishing two dinners.

The unknowing object of all this solicitude climbed resolutely up the steps of the respectably dingy brownstone on West 74th Street, carefully knocked the snow from her overshoes, and then entered her own little apartment. For the first time in months she felt herself again.

Miss Hildegarde Withers had long looked forward to the frabjous day when she could retire from P.S. 38 and its generations of grubby urchins on a modest pension and devote the rest of her days to her chosen avocation of being self-appointed gadfly to the police department. But now when that time had come she hadn’t quite known what to do with herself. She seemed no longer to happen luckily in on the scenes of murder—the laws of

Probability and Coincidence were belatedly beginning to take effect—nor did she now manage as in the past to beat the paddy-wagon and the medical examiner to the most interesting corpses and then affix herself like a burr to the Inspector's coat tail. What few cases the little man did discuss with her when he dropped in for a visit were solved already by routine methods, or else were trite and uninteresting.

Not for her were the mild aseptic activities and amusements available to a woman of her age, income, and position in society; welfare groups and improvement clubs bored her to tears. And yet there hadn't seemed to be anything else.

For a while she had thrown herself with characteristic enthusiasm into her recently acquired hobby of raising tropical fish, and the glass breeding-tanks had multiplied in the little apartment until the load of their necessary heaters, aerators, and lights had kept blowing the fuses and she had at last been forced to give away every one of the tiny jeweled fish. No pet had replaced them. After Dempsey, the effervescent wire-terrier who had shared so many of her earlier adventures, breathed out his span of life it had seemed somehow disloyal to think of getting another dog. Cats always gave Miss Withers a sense of inferiority, they were so aloof and self-sufficient. Canaries made her nervous with their twittering.

What she had really been yearning for was a knotty problem on which to try the sharp edges of her mind. Now she squatted on the floor, happy as a clam in a tide-pool, riffling through the basketful of Christmas cards which in the old tradition she always kept around, like her little spruce tree and the mistletoe and holly, until Twelfth Night. There were almost two hundred of the greetings, many of them from former pupils now gone out into the world. Cheery bits of cardboard, she thought, though she wondered as always just what covered bridges and baby rabbits and elves and palm trees had to do with the Nativity. There were cards embossed and printed and engraved, cards a composite of family snapshots, hand-painted cards and comic cartoon cards and cards painfully printed in Crayola by sticky little fingers.

But in all the lot there was no card from Alice Davidson.

Though she might have been sitting down to a table loaded with spicy Italian delicacies, Miss Withers had no regrets as she made herself a frugal meal of tuna-fish salad and tea. This problem was not one for the

Inspector's official mind, at least not yet. He would never in the world understand why Alice was one of the people to whom the sending of Christmas cards was almost a compulsion-neurosis, as inevitable as death and taxes.

There had been one from her every year for seven years, until this Christmas. Indeed, her not sending a greeting was a tangible thing, like the *not-striking* of a familiar clock that has run down.

The schoolteacher filled up her teacup again, frowning with concentration as she tried to remember everything possible about Alice Davidson. It was little enough. The girl (every female a few years younger than herself was a girl to Miss Withers) had lived in the apartment directly across the hall. She'd been a friendly, shy little thing, anxious to please. They had drifted into a casual, neighborly sort of friendship unusual in New York, which involved the occasional borrowing of a cup of sugar or an egg, the signing for each other's telegrams or packages, sometimes the sharing of a meal or tickets to a concert.

Miss Withers had been happy to oblige by slipping in to feed the love-birds (a pair named Tabby and Towser because they fought like cats and dogs) when Alice was away for the week-end, and Alice when she felt like a breath of air had sometimes borrowed Dempsey and the leash and let the madcap terrier drag her around the Park.

All that had taken place back in a happier, pre-war era, when apartments were available and most New Yorkers obeyed a sort of lemming-like urge to pull up stakes at least once a year. Alice too had moved away, and the two women drifted out of touch so that at last there was only the exchange of Christmas cards with a scribbled note inside which remained as the last tenuous link between two ships that had passed in the night.

Miss Withers shook her head. She was an avid reader of the Vital Statistics column in the *Times*, and Alice's name hadn't appeared there among the deceased or married. Call it intuition or extra-sensory perception or just an old-fashioned hunch, she felt it in her bones that Alice Davidson would have sent her a Christmas card again this year if she hadn't been—prevented.

Alice had always made so much of the holiday season, clinging to the old forms and observances like most lonely people who remember a happy,

small-town childhood.

Here at last, she felt, was something to go on. Not quite of course the nice fresh corpse that the Inspector had asked for. But he was involved in his own problems at the moment anyway. She would have to carry on her own investigation, very quietly. Picking up the Manhattan telephone directory, she began by making three calls. From the first she learned that the number listed for Alice Davidson had been discontinued. From the second she discovered that Miss Davidson had given up the lease on her furnished apartment on East 47th Street October first, and moved to a big hotel on Park Avenue. The third call, to the Hotel Grandee, finally produced the information that Alice Davidson had checked out October 11th last, and that the only address they had was what she had written when she registered, and that was 47th Street again. She was right back where she had started.

The street noises from outside and from Central Park West were hushed now by the heavy snowfall so that after an hour or so Miss Withers began to feel that she was floating in a void, as alone as Beebe in his bathysphere, and almost expected some great curious monster to come bumping its nose against her window pane. Finally she snapped out of the mood and prepared for bed, giving her hair its requisite hundred strokes. It took her a long time to get to sleep that night, and when she did she immediately found herself helplessly drifting, then moving faster and faster at breathless speed down winding, formless avenues of oblivion. No, it was a taxicab she was in, and she dared not speak to the driver for fear he might turn his head.

She tried to catch a glimpse of the signs on the lamp posts that hurtled by, but they all read *Dead End Street*. Faster and still faster they plummeted toward their destination, which suddenly turned out to be a vast mausoleum of black marble bearing the sign *Dead Letter Office*, and then somehow she was inside, watching the dead letters being shoveled into open graves marked *Dead Storage*. The faceless attendants in white were about to shovel her in along with the letters, but Miss Withers said firmly to herself, *This is only a nightmare and I must wake up at once!* So she did.

She sat up in bed to face the pale glow of Manhattan's dawn, shivering a little. It had been a very real and unpleasant fantasy indeed. Miss Hildegarde Withers was not given to oneiromancy; she turned neither to

Freud nor to the Gypsy Dream Book to have her dreams analyzed, but it was perfectly clear what her subconscious mind had been trying to tell her about the reason why Alice Davidson hadn't sent her a Christmas card this year.

*“He that will go to the City … must needs go out of this World.”*

—John Bunyan

### 3

THOUGH SHE HAD BEEN ACUTELY uncomfortable for every single minute of the eight hours she had spent in that day-coach, Miss Withers stood on the station platform and looked wistfully after the rear end of the departing train. The town of Bagley's Mills, Pennsylvania, might not have been the identical whistle-stop immortalized by Irvin S. Cobb when on a lecture tour he looked out of his Pullman window early one rainy morning and whispered, "Oh, God, what a wonderful place to die in!" but it would have done just as well.

There was of course no waiting taxicab or bus, so she plodded through the slushy mixture of coal dust and snow toward the distant business section. Eventually her quest led her past innumerable miners' shanties to the hill at the far edge of the town, where she climbed the steep steps leading to what had no doubt once been the local mansion, now a sagging and decrepit edifice covered with architectural gingerbread and bearing signs reading: *Justice of the Peace* and *Abstracts* and *Tourists Taken*.

To reach the door the schoolteacher had to run the gantlet of snowballs hurled with more malice than accuracy by what seemed a horde of screaming red-nosed little girls on either side of the uncleared walk. Nor was there any warmth in the expression of the gloomy gray man who answered her knock. He was thinnish, stooped, and balding, and there was egg on his vest and bitterness in his eye.

"Mr. Davidson?" she opened briskly. "I am Miss Hildegarde Withers  
\_\_\_\_"

"I'm Judge Davidson—but we don't want to subscribe to anything or buy anything," he said quickly.

But the door was firmly blocked by her overshoe. "It's about *Alice*!"

"What about her?"

"If I might come in—?"

He hesitated, then silently stood aside. Miss Withers marched into a hall filled with mittens, overshoes, and skis, and then on into a big battered living-room from which numerous larger girls of assorted sizes, all wearing

a uniform of boys' shirts and blue-jeans, hastily exited on a barked command of "Scat!"

"Oh, you run a girls' school?" Miss Withers asked innocently.

"My daughters," admitted Davidson. "My wife," he added, nodding toward a shapeless, pink-faced woman who hastily entered from the kitchen, wiping her hands on an apron.

"How do you do?" said the schoolteacher politely.

But her host gestured impatiently toward a chair. "Now what's this about Alice? What's the fool girl been up to now?"

"George!" murmured the fat woman vaguely.

"Well," began Miss Withers, "it's rather a long story. It began, you see, with a Christmas card—"

He wasn't listening. "She's been home on vacation since before Christmas, but of course she never tells us anything. Not Alice!"

The schoolteacher felt as if she had sat down in a chair that wasn't there. "Do I understand you to say that Alice Davidson is here in this town, in this *house*?"

"Why wouldn't she be? It's her home, isn't it?"

"But—"

"As a matter of fact, she's up taking a bath right now."

But a clear voice corrected him. "I am not, I'm listening on the stairs." And there appeared a long-legged, hoydenish girl, wrapped in a woolly white robe, her hair like a drowned rat's. But the face, in spite of its remainder of baby-fat and its well-scrubbed shininess, was one which Miss Withers felt would be extremely disturbing to a number of men before her time was up. "Did I hear my name taken in *vain*? What goes, or *shouldn't* I ask?"

Miss Withers sighed. "I'm afraid I've got the wrong Alice," she admitted. "Mr. Davidson, haven't you a sister?"

"Oh!" he said flatly, his face darkening. "You mean that—"

"George!" his wife put in.

"What makes you think that she'd be here?" he asked.

"I didn't, really," admitted the schoolteacher. "But I have to eliminate all the possibilities. I thought it would do no harm to find out. She doesn't seem to be anywhere else, either."

“I haven’t heard from my sister Alice in years, and I don’t care if I never do!” he said, biting off the words.

“*Father!*” said the girl in the doorway.

“You go to your room and get some clothes on!” he snapped.

“*Father, sometimes—*” she began, and gave a most lady-like shrug. Then she reluctantly departed.

“I suppose Alice is in some trouble or other,” Davidson went on after a moment, almost hopefully.

“Perhaps,” said Miss Withers. “Anyway she has disappeared, dropped out of sight. I’m an old friend of hers, or at least we used to be neighbors, and without quite understanding how it happened I find myself trying to get to the bottom of it all. I’m here because during my investigation I found the manager of an apartment house where she used to live who remembered that she always took the weekly edition of your Bagley’s Mills *News-Republic*, and that office informed me that Alice lived here as a girl and that you were her brother.”

“She’s no sister of mine,” he said querulously. “Alice never thought of anyone but herself. And after what she did—” Davidson’s mouth snapped shut tight.

There was a long silence. “Could you suggest any possible way in which I might get in touch with her? Did she have any old friends who might know, or is there any way at all—?”

He shook his head, almost fanatically. “As far as we are concerned, Alice is dead.”

“George!” came the monotonous refrain from the corner.

“Perhaps,” Miss Withers suggested, “she’s dead as far as everyone else is concerned, too. That’s what I’m trying to find out.” She rose to her feet. “Sorry to have troubled you for nothing. I have no official standing, of course. I can’t make you answer any questions you don’t want to answer. But I wonder if you’d be kind enough to take my card, and let me know if you hear anything of her, or even if you think of anything that might shed light on her disappearance?” She scribbled a few words on a bit of pasteboard.

“Sure, sure,” said George Davidson. He took the card, but there was a look in his eye which indicated that it would be filed immediately in the wastebasket. As they started to leave the living-room there was the sound of

teen-age giggles in the hall, and a scurrying on the stairs. Then Miss Withers was out in the cold air again, running the snowball gantlet in reverse.

*Another blind alley*, she thought. No wonder George Davidson was bitter, with a dozen or so daughters and all at home. Like most people who have come to middle age without experiencing domestic felicity, the schoolteacher was apt to romanticize it a bit, but it was at moments like this that she realized it might have its drawbacks.

Somewhat resigned to her solitary existence, she returned hastily to the railroad station, to be immediately seized upon there by a breathless young woman in leather jacket and baggy pants, a red scarf wrapped around her head. “Oh, *here* you are!” the girl cried. “*Flang* myself into some rags and patches and came *helling* down the back way on skis, *because*—”

“Oh?” said the startled schoolma’am. “Can it be that you’re the one who was taking the bath, the wrong Alice?”

“Yep. Only my *friends* call me Jeeps. I didn’t want you to go away with the wrong *impression*, I mean about Aunt Alice.” The girl hesitated. “Pops said—well, you see, he had a perfectly *awful* fight with her when she was here last. I was only a *child* then, so I don’t remember much about it.”

“Really? These family quarrels can be very bitter, I understand. Tell me, were you named after your aunt?”

Jeeps nodded. “Sure. But about the *quarrel*—my father wanted Aunt Alice to borrow money on a big insurance policy she carried, to help him finance a new business. She wouldn’t do it. Poor dear, he’s failed at most *everything*, so maybe it was *just* as well.” She lowered her voice. “I wouldn’t want this to get around, but Auntie kept in touch with me on the quiet; she *even* lent me money to finish my last year at school!”

“Oh?” said Miss Withers. “Do go on, child.”

“And then this summer I got a job in Scranton, working in a beauty parlor and making a *lot* of money. I wrote her early in the fall that I could start paying some of it back, but she answered and said that she didn’t *need* it! That’s the last I heard from her—it was in September.”

“No Christmas card?”

“*Nothing*. And always before this she sent me some little present, care of general delivery so Father wouldn’t find out and hit the ceiling. I guess

she had a soft spot in her heart for me because I was her godchild. Do you really think that something has *happened* to her?"

"I honestly don't know," Miss Withers admitted. "And it isn't any of my business, really. But all the same—" Impulsively, she felt a strong liking for this girl. In an affair of this kind she couldn't have too many allies, and so she told her her suspicions. It was a somewhat condensed report, cut even shorter by the roar of the approaching east-bound local.

"I think what you're trying to do is *wonderful!*" Jeeps said. "It's like—it's like *Joan of Arc!* I want to help, in any way I can."

But Miss Withers had to grab up her belongings and run. Standing on the train step, she turned. "Perhaps you *can* help," she said. "About that insurance policy you mentioned—"

The intent young face frowned with concentration. "All I know is that it was a *big* one—fifteen thousand, I think."

"And who was the beneficiary, do you know?"

The train was moving now, but strong young legs kept pace with it. "Why—"

There was a sudden shriek from the engine and a blast of released steam, and then a lurch that knocked Miss Withers galley-west. Clutching her hat, her umbrella, her handbag, and a surprised brakeman who happened to be standing near by, the schoolteacher leaned out and cried, "I can't hear you! Who did you say was the beneficiary?"

The train was picking up speed now, and Jeeps was dropping back, growing smaller as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope. But the girl valiantly held her mitten hands to her lips, and faintly above the noises of the train Miss Withers heard the one word, ungrammatical but clear. "Me!" sang out the wrong Alice.

And that was that. The schoolteacher settled herself into a plush seat, let down with disappointment. Of course there was a certain negative value in eliminating the possibility that the missing woman had, as the Inspector had suggested, got tired of the big city and gone home. One look at Bagley's Mills had settled that. But like a tenderfoot in the wilderness of the north woods, Miss Withers had been wandering in circles. Every promising lead that she tried to follow either petered out or else led eventually back to the point from which she had started, in a blind alley opening off a dead-end street.

She said almost as much to the Inspector when she phoned him a few days later. "But I am glad to find that you're still at your old desk," she added.

"It may not be for long," the little Irishman told her. "Because the heat is still on."

"Then I gather that you're not in a position to be sympathetic about my little problem of the missing women, and particularly about what happened to Alice Davidson?"

"Frankly, no," he said. "We have enough unsolved murders as it is—more than our share, in a big city like this. And you have nothing but a flash of intuition to indicate that there was any crime here at all. If you've dedicated yourself to be the champion of lost causes, then it'll have to be on your own head."

"But Alice—" she began.

"Maybe she went down the rabbit-hole," he suggested.

"I wish you wouldn't show off your erudition at times like this. Oscar, I know I've got something here. If you'd been with me, if you'd talked with that pretty little girl in that awful town in the coal country of Pennsylvania —"

"God forbid," the Inspector said. As far as he was concerned, everything west of the Hudson was a howling wilderness, to be avoided as the plague. "All I can say to you is to repeat my advice—"

"Wait!" she interrupted. "Somebody at the door." For a little while there was silence, and then Miss Withers's voice again, tense with excitement. "Oscar, she's *here!*"

"Who's here—I mean there?"

"The girl, Oscar! The wrong Alice, and she says she has a *clue!*"

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us from women with clues," muttered the Inspector. But the line was dead.

Jeeps Davidson was perched on the edge of Miss Withers's sofa, looking very sleek and grown up in a smart tailored suit, her short toasted-blond hair neatly waved over her forehead. "I hope you don't mind too awfully," she was saying breathlessly. "But I thought and thought about what you were doing, and I just couldn't stay away. I found the card with your address that Father threw into the fireplace, and so—"

"But what will your family think?"

“Oh, I’m *supposed* to be on my way back to Scranton and my job. Only why should I waste myself on being a beautician *all* my life, when I took a degree in education?”

“But surely you don’t want to be a detective?”

Jeeps shrugged. “What I’ve always really wanted to do *most* was go on the stage. But this sounds loads more exciting even than that! Please, *please* say you’ll let me stay and help! I won’t get in your way or be any burden—I have some money of my own. And remember, it’s *my* aunt that you’re trying to investigate the disappearance of!”

“Yes, child, but—”

“And I *did* think you ought to know about the insurance policy.”

“The one of which you are the beneficiary?”

“But that’s just the point, I’m not really! Oh, she *had* to put some name down on the policy. But it was a twenty-year endowment that Aunt Alice took out when she got her first job, before I was out of diapers. I waited until Father was out one day and wormed the details from Mother. What I want to know *now* is, does it help any?”

“Why—perhaps. I suppose the more we can learn about Alice Davidson, the better chance there’ll be—”

“But don’t you *see*?” Jeeps interrupted eagerly. “The twenty years is up, and that policy must have matured or whatever they call it, by this time. Suppose Aunt Alice *collected* her fifteen thousand dollars—and that’s why she wrote me that she didn’t need any money?”

The vague pattern which had been trying to form in Miss Withers’s mind now suddenly rearranged itself, like a kaleidoscope. “Oh, dear!” she murmured.

Jeeps nodded wisely. “*Motive!*”

For a long moment there was silence in the room. Then the schoolteacher sighed resignedly. “Where’s your suitcase?”

“Downstairs in the hall. You mean, I can stay?”

Miss Withers sniffed. “This wicked old city with its pitfalls is no place for a pretty girl to go running around in alone.”

“You don’t know me very well, do you?” Jeeps grinned. “Pitfalls, look out—*here* I come!”

“You bring that suitcase up here and unpack it,” said the schoolteacher. “We have work to do.”

*“A scarecrow in a garden of cucumbers keepeth nothing.”*

—Baruch 6

ONE THING LED TO ANOTHER, and before the week was out Miss Hildegarde Withers began to feel rather like the boy in the story who started to jerk an angleworm out of the ground and kept pulling and pulling until he found he had a fullgrown boa-constrictor by the tail.

“It is certainly time this evidence was laid before the police,” the schoolteacher observed over the toffee cups one bright wintry morning. “I can’t wait to see the expression on the Inspector’s face! The man is always accusing me of taking the law into my own hands and rushing in where the properly constituted authorities should be treading. But now—”

“They’ll have to do *something* about it, certainly,” Jeeps said. “But what?”

“Photographs on the teletype, releases to the newspapers, all sorts of publicity. They have all the facilities to make a tremendous explosion about this.” Miss Withers frowned. “Child, don’t you ever eat anything for breakfast except a cup of coffee and a cigarette?”

“Sometimes I have a stick of gum. But I’m too excited to eat anyway. Can I *please* tag along when you go down to Headquarters?”

“*May I*,” the schoolteacher said automatically. “No, not unless you change out of those red pajamas into something a little less likely to cause a riot among the younger policemen.”

An hour later they were entering the portals of the dismal old stone building at 240 Centre Street, Jeeps sedately clad in a fur jacket and soft wool dress but still standing out in those grim corridors like an orchid in an ashcan. Never in her life had Miss Withers had so many men rush to hold doors open for her.

She parked the girl outside the Inspector’s office, and went in alone. For once his face lit up. “Well,” he cried, “I was beginning to think you’d done a disappearing act too, along with your three thousand missing ladies. Nobody’s been home when I phoned.”

“We’ve been busy,” she said crisply. “More than busy.”

“*We?*” He looked blank. “Don’t tell me that girl is still with you, the one you called the wrong Alice?”

Miss Withers nodded. "Very much so. She's been of considerable help to me, too, though she has a way of speaking in *italics*, if you know what I mean. And really no more trouble to have around than a whirling dervish. I don't miss that madcap wire-terrier of mine any more, I can tell you that. But apart from the natural exuberance of youth and some cigarette ashes strewn here and there, we get along very well."

"But where does she come in? What's her interest?"

The schoolteacher said with a smile, "It's possible that she was fond of her aunt, and is determined to find her or else help avenge her murder. It is also possible that she has certain expectations—there was an insurance policy of considerable size."

He sighed. "You've still got that bee in your bonnet?"

"When I started on this thankless task," Miss Withers told him, "I was working completely in the dark. In most investigations you start with the corpse, plus a number of suspects. Here I had neither. It was like learning to play three-dimensional chess blindfolded and with mittens on. But now—"

"Don't tell me you've got something?"

She nodded. "Murder. Murder most foul."

"With no corpses left around?" He grinned. "A new kind of mass murder."

The schoolteacher shook her head so that her hat, which today resembled a frigate under full sail, careened sharply to starboard. "No, Oscar. Just to simplify things I've narrowed my sights down a little. Jeeps—I mean Alice Davidson Junior—and I have had a very busy week. We've been running into the library so often to look at the old newspaper files that I've almost expected the stone lions at the Fifth Avenue entrance to recognize us and start wagging their tails. Luckily a number of my former pupils with whom I keep in touch have grown up to assume jobs with department stores and banks and public utility companies, so I've had access to certain records not available to the general public. Sometimes when that didn't work my assistant sleuth has got results by flickering her long eyelashes at susceptible males. Out of it all we've boiled it down to four cases that I'm positive about—four women of the type I was talking about to you the other day—middle-aged, lonely, unattached—who ought to be around somewhere enjoying life, and who aren't."

“But people are always dropping out of sight,” the Inspector reminded her. “It’s a part of modern existence. Home ties, friendship, even marriage don’t mean what they did when we were young. People move, change jobs, marry and divorce and remarry and change their names for luck or business reasons. They drift away—”

“Yes,” she said grimly, “sometimes they drift right out of this world! Because as we kept on snooping, a pattern began to emerge. The drift was in a certain direction, along parallel lines that meet in infinity. I’ll show you.” Miss Withers stepped to the door, opened it, and beckoned.

Piper took a look at Jeeps, did a double-take, and then stood up. “Well, Hildegarde,” he said fervently, “I don’t know what you’re hunting for, but you’re using the right kind of bait.”

She introduced them. “Oh,” Jeeps said in a disappointed tone. “I thought you’d be wearing your uniform. But I bet you look super-super in it, Inspector!”

“His only uniform is a big smelly cigar and a cloak of indifference,” Miss Withers put in tartly. She took from the girl the black looseleaf notebook which contained the results of their week’s work. “Oscar, after you’ve seen this I think you’ll agree with me that what we have discovered requires definite and immediate action.”

He hesitated. “Couldn’t you just give me a quick fill-in—the highlights? I’ve got to be over at the Municipal Building in a few minutes.”

“Very well. Jeeps, will you—?”

“File One,” said the girl, her voice ringing with importance. “Alice Davidson—that’s my aunt. Age forty-two. Buyer for women’s wear, attractive, unmarried. Collected fifteen thousand dollars on an endowment insurance policy last September eighteenth. A week later she took leave of absence from her job with a downtown wholesaler, gave up her lease on a furnished apartment on East Forty-Seventh, and moved to a big hotel on Park. She checked out ten days later and hasn’t been heard of since. Nothing in Vital Statistics about her. State Department says she made no request for a passport. No airline or steamer bookings. Closed out her bank account the day she checked out of the hotel.”

“Well,” said the Inspector, “that doesn’t indicate—”

“Wait, Oscar! Next file, please.”

“Ethel Brinker, age forty-six, registered nurse and quite nice-looking according to this photo in the newspaper clipping. It tells about how she invented a burpless baby bottle and sold the patent outright for twenty thousand dollars. Nurses’ registry has only her old address on file, a rooming-house in the Bronx from which she moved to a luxury hotel last November fifth. Two weeks later she checked out and hasn’t been heard of since.”

“And an interesting sidelight on Miss Brinker is that the woman who runs the rooming-house where she used to live says there has been someone around looking for her. It seems that she left a pet poodle at a boarding-kennel out on Long Island, and they want some money or they threaten to sell the dog,” put in Miss Withers.

“Nasty little white lap dogs with pink, runny eyes,” said the Inspector. “If I owned one I’d abandon it too, quick as I could.”

“File Three,” Jeeps continued. “Mae Carter, a pretty though plump widow of thirty-eight who got into the Camden newspapers last fall by winning a radio jackpot give-away netting her a new convertible, an all-electric kitchen, a completely furnished prefabricated honeymoon cottage, free dental care for the rest of her life, and some other stuff. It was supposed to be twenty-five thousand dollars’ worth, but she turned it into cash for about half that, came to New York November twenty-first for a shopping spree, and disappeared a few days later.

“File Four: Emma Sue Atkins, a Baltimore divorcée of forty-three who on December first accepted a settlement of seventeen thousand five hundred dollars for injuries sustained a year ago in a taxi accident. She came to New York for a fling, and then checked out of her hotel December thirteenth and hasn’t been heard of since.”

“There!” said Miss Withers triumphantly. “Now, to use the inelegant expression of your own, Oscar, do you still think I’m barking up the wrong tree?”

“Hmmm,” he said. “Let’s see. You’ve found four women who seem to have dropped out of sight under apparently similar circumstances.”

“Apparently? You might as well say that coal is *apparently* black!”

“But out of so many cases you were bound to find some similarities,” he went on patiently. “I bet if you hunted long enough you could find four women who had their nails manicured, ate shrimps for lunch, went to a

movie, and then on the way home came up out of the subway to be hit by a red two-ton delivery truck loaded with old newspapers, but that wouldn't prove anything. It's like having the answer and working back to the problem—it's too easy to discard any factors that don't fit. There's nothing odd certainly about women with sudden prosperity going to the big luxury hotels, that's what the places are for. And with money, no doubt they want to make a break with the past, and start a new life."

"But what fun is money if you can't show off before people who knew you *when*?" Miss Withers pointed to the notebook. "Besides, why have we found that all these women left so much of the minor business of life unattended to? What about the inactive bank accounts, deposit accounts at Macy's, and the rest of it? What about the new suit that Mae Carter left at Altman's for alterations and never picked up? What about Emma Sue Atkins's pledge of fifty dollars to the Red Cross that's never been paid, and the abandoned pet and the unsent Christmas cards?"

"Women," pronounced the Inspector, "are unpredictable."

Miss Withers exchanged a smile with Jeeps. "Not to other women, Oscar. Very well, then I'll play my last trump. Would it make any difference to you if I said that all four of these women stayed at the same hotel within the last six months? Isn't it a little odd that they all made their exit from the same gorgeous clip-joint—the Hotel Grandee over on Park Avenue?"

"Oh," he said flatly. "The *Grandee*."

"What about it, Oscar?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. I mean, that's one place where there's absolutely no funny business. From our point of view it's one of the best-run hotels in town. Since they had their grand opening last spring they've had a perfect record—no gambling, no vice, no rough stuff, and only one suicide."

"And that one?"

"Relax, Hildegarde. There was no question about its being suicide, and the body was identified as one Harriet Bascom, so it wasn't one of your four. Just a little librarian from Poughkeepsie who got broke and discouraged and did a swan-dive out of a window one night last summer."

She subsided, a little disappointed. "All the same—well, Oscar? We're waiting." On the other side of the desk Jeeps had her fingers crossed.

The Inspector looked at his wrist-watch and scowled. "I don't quite—"

“Now don’t say I ought to take this to Missing Persons! We’ve already checked their files and photographs. But they say that only the next of kin can request an official investigation. All we got was a polite runaround.” She sniffed indignantly.

“They know their job,” Piper told her. “They also know that ninety-nine times out of a hundred when people disappear they’re actually only concealing the fact that they’re undergoing psychiatric treatment, or doing time for shoplifting, or married to somebody their family wouldn’t approve of. It can be very embarrassing to drag that out into the light.” He stood up and put on his coat. “If I tried to start a homicide investigation without even the slightest proof that anybody had even died, I’d be laughed right out of my job, especially with the Department in the midst of a shake-up. Tell you what, you come down and see me the first of the week, and maybe I can find a private investigator who’ll take the case without charging you much of a fee. Now I’ve got to rush—excuse me, ladies.”

The door closed behind him.

“A *private eye!*!” breathed Jeeps dreamily. “Somebody like Alan Ladd —”

“Most of the ones I’ve seen,” Miss Withers told her, “are more inclined to resemble William Bendix. But we’ll have no truck with that breed. ‘I’ll do it myself, said the little red hen, and she did.’”

“But what more can we do? We can’t send out circulars and photos on the teletype and get newspaper publicity and *force* people to answer our questions.”

“No,” admitted Miss Withers. “But all the same—never underestimate the power of a woman.”

“Huh?” Jeeps looked blank.

“Like the generals in the last war, I am about to make a strategic withdrawal to previously prepared positions. Knowing the Inspector of old, I was somewhat prepared for his decision.”

“But you *do* like him quite a lot, don’t you?” the girl asked shrewdly.

“My dear child, apart from the sentimental fondness any woman feels for the only man who ever proposed to her, I detest him—as a symbol of a world dominated by masculinity. Speaking of proposals, I think I am shortly to receive another.”

Jeeps now looked completely blank. “From *who?*”

“Whom. I don’t know his name. We might call him Mr. Nemo, or Monsieur Personne—*Nobody*, in other words, although I know he exists. Just as you know a spider exists when you see a web, and the center of this particular web is the Hotel Grandee.”

The girl took a deep breath. “Okay, when do we start?”

“I, not we,” the schoolteacher told her firmly. “What I have in mind is a very dangerous experiment, and I’m not going to let anyone else get involved in it. You, my child, are being shipped home on the first train.”

“But—”

“But me no buts!” said Miss Hildegarde Withers, in her classroom voice. As they rode back uptown in the subway she opened the notebook again, turning to clippings in the back—blind alleys that they had followed to the end, prospects that didn’t pan out. “Ah,” she said. “From a United Press dispatch, La Porte, Indiana, December third—‘Mrs. Josie Goggins of this city nearly fainted with surprise and delight last night when she answered the telephone and learned that hers was the winning guess on the Miss Whosit radio contest, netting the attractive widow an eight-room house completely furnished with antiques, a two-motor plane, a chinchilla coat, free maid service for a year, and tax-exempt bonds to bring the amount to thirty-five thousand dollars . . .’”

And so it happened that when long shadows were falling on Park Avenue the next afternoon, a hired limousine drew up at the canopy of the Hotel Grandee, depositing on the curb a tall and somewhat bewildered woman wrapped in chinchilla, and snowed under with eleven pieces of new and expensive luggage. She was led inside by Muller, the doorman, as gently as if she were a piece of Venetian glass. Then she registered, and was convoyed ceremoniously to the elevators by a circle of bellboys, somewhat like the Queen Mary being worked into her mooring.

“That new 19A22,” observed the ninth assistant-manager, on desk duty. “I’ve seen her someplace before.”

“So have I,” came back the fourteenth, on stand-by duty. “In the funny papers.”

“Wait,” the other said. He snapped his fingers and then reached under the counter for a much-folded copy of the *Daily Racing Form*, pointing to a photograph on page one. “That’s it,” he said. “Put a red wig and some

diamond earrings on Citation and the horse would be a dead ringer for Mrs. —what is it? Mrs. Josie Goggins.”

“Okay, but—jiggers!” The *Form* was whisked instantly out of sight and both bright young men were busily engaged in essential enterprises when a comfortable, stocky man in a quiet tweed topcoat sauntered by, looking very much at peace with himself and the world. “Good afternoon, Mr. Brady—in spite of the snow,” said Nine.

“That snow,” said Brady didactically, “is a godsend to the farmers, after a dry fall. The more moisture falls, the better, as far as the crops are concerned.” Both the young assistant-managers nodded, feeling suddenly as if they must have left something undone or unbuttoned. Mr. Brady always stared at people a fraction of a second longer than was necessary; realizing the fact, he usually wore a pair of heavy tortoise-shell rimmed glasses with just a shade of amber tint to them, to take the edge off his glance.

Upstairs on the nineteenth floor the newly arrived guest was moving uneasily about her suite, like a cat in a strange house. A bellboy with a snub nose and a winning smile was briskly giving her the second step of the Grandee’s plunniest welcome, arranging a number of bowls of great yellow chrysanthemums in the living-room so that it resembled a stage setting. He also dumped bowls of fresh hothouse fruits in the bedroom. “Compliments of the management, Mrs. Goggins,” he said to her.

“Oh—oh, yes. Thank you very much.”

The doorbell rang, and he sprang gallantly to answer it. All of a sudden a voice cried, “Oh, madame, I am *so* disconsolate—that I ’ave been late!” She was wearing beneath her light coat a uniform of sleazy black silk, knee-length and with a frilly lace apron. “I ’ope you ’ave not been angry wiz Gigi?”

“Oh, *no!*” gasped Miss Hildegarde Withers.

Jeeps put down the small bag she carried, and then moved quickly to head off the bellboy, who was returning to the chrysanthemums. “I am Madame Goggeens’ *personal* maid,” she told him loftily. “I myself arrange the flowers the way she like zem. *Merci beaucoup!*” She handed him a dollar in dismissal. As the door closed behind him, the girl turned to Miss Withers. “You’re really not angry wiz—I mean *with* me?”

“My feelings, at this moment, are—”

“Because it isn’t safe for you to go into this alone. And I played one of the leads in our class play, and *everybody* knows how a French maid talks —”

“But that uniform!” said the schoolteacher weakly.

“It was the only one I could rent. And I remembered that one of the prizes the real Mrs. Goggins won was maid service for a year so—” She paused for breath. “I can let down the hem or something. *Please* can I stay?”

“I still—”

“If you send me away I’ll go down to Centre Street and tell the Inspector what you’re up to!”

“Blackmail,” said Miss Hildegarde Withers. “Well, for heaven’s sake at least get out of that silly costume and into your own clothes!” She sighed with resignation, and then, turning, caught a glance at herself in the mirror, and winced. The woman who looked out at her had brightly hennaed hair, suspiciously long dark eyelashes, and an extremely unreal complexion. “Oh, dear!” she said. “This is none of I!”

“*Me*,” Jeeps corrected. “They were a *little* heavy-handed with you at the beauty parlor. Let me tone you down, and then you can go downstairs and start waiting for Mr. Nemo to pounce. Do you know, I think this is going to be *fun!*”

“I disagree,” said Miss Withers firmly. “Already I’m blushing under my paint to realize how much I resemble an aging bawd.”

The girl stroked the incredibly soft fur. “*Anybody* wrapped in chinchilla is a lady.”

“Perhaps so. But how can I relax, knowing how much I had to pay for a week’s rental and insurance? If one of my former pupils weren’t head of a fur company, I couldn’t have managed it at all.” She shook her head. “The worst of it is, now that I’m all done up like Mrs. Astor’s horse, I don’t know just how and where to start operations.”

“Don’t worry; if we’re right, *he’ll* make the first move. You probably ought to make it easy for him by cruising around the cocktail lounges. And if you see a likely prospect—”

“I know. I drop my handkerchief.”

Jeeps shrieked. “Heavens, no! Even holding an unlighted cigarette and looking helpless is pretty passé. Dropping your purse and letting compact

and coins and everything scatter on the floor isn't so bad—”

“I had thought,” admitted the schoolteacher, “that when I have ordered enough drinks and disposed of them quietly in the upholstery or the potted palms, I might find that I have nothing in my handbag smaller than a five-hundred-dollar bill?”

Jeeps's eyes widened with admiration. “Good, *good!* Some man will take pity on you. And it'll get around the hotel in no time that you're the original Mrs. Richbitch.”

Half an hour later Miss Withers was ready, or as ready as she would ever be. The diamond and sapphire bracelets on her arm would stand anything short of inspection through a jeweler's eye-piece, and Jeeps's deft young fingers had softened her hair a little, subtly changed the lines of her lip-rouge. “Not bad,” she said. “I wish the Inspector could see you now.”

“I'd rather be burned at the stake! Child, I do wish you were coming with me, for moral support.”

“It wouldn't look natural to take a maid along, and besides I might scare Mr. Nemo away. I was thinking that perhaps I could make a little time with the hired help—that *cute* bellboy with the crew-cut. They always know *everything* that goes on in a big hotel.”

“From the way he stared at your legs when you came in, I shouldn't think you'd have much trouble in reducing him to a quivering jelly. But be careful, child. This place frightens me somehow.” Miss Withers sighed. “If I had but known! as the *ingénue* was always saying in the old mystery dramas. My, my, the things my stern New England conscience leads me to do!” She hitched up her paste bracelets, preparatory to taking the plunge—and then there came a ringing at the door.

Jeeps had been sprawled in her favorite position on the carpet, her long pajama-clad legs in a chair. But she somehow managed to get to the door before Miss Withers had even started.

It was a man neither of them had ever seen before, but he came briskly in, shook the girl enthusiastically by both hands, and said, “So glad to meet you! I'm Jerry Forrest. It's all fixed, you don't need to worry about a thing.”

“Oh?” said Jeeps blankly. He could have been anywhere between thirty and forty-five, rather resembling a young and beardless Santa Claus—big pink blob of a nose stuck in a doughy face, clothes that had probably been made by an expensive tailor and certainly had been slept in, a wide,

fixed smile, and a way of speaking in short, breathless blasts like a German burp-gun.

“Say, you’re not Mrs. Goggins or Mrs. Anything,” he caught himself smoothly. “Should have known.” He turned and saw the schoolteacher across the room. “Ah, there you are! Mrs. Goggins, I’m happy to meet you. Good news, you luckiest of lucky ladies. It’s all fixed.”

“I—I didn’t know that anything needed fixing.”

“Yes, ma’am. Among other things, I’m public relations man for the hotel. Soon as I saw your name on registry I remembered the publicity stories. So you’re a natural.” He came toward her, walking lightly for all his heft. “We have Blues Sandman, one of the biggest band-leaders in town, here at the Emerald Room. You, Mrs. Goggins, are going to be interviewed on the air by him. At your table tonight, between numbers. Ten to eleven, nationwide hookup. How does it feel to win a big radio jackpot? What’s been your biggest thrill since then, apart from staying here at the Grandee of course? Got to get that plug in.” He jabbed at her with his finger. “What’s your favorite song?”

“Song? Why—er—I think the *Bell Song*, from *Lakmé*.”

“Very well, whatever it is, the boys will whip up a bebop arrangement and play it while you dance around the floor with Blues Sandman himself. Every other woman in the place turns green with envy, that’s for sure.”

Miss Withers took a deep breath. “It all sounds very—”

“Sure it does! And the tab for you and your lovely daughter, up to a hundred bucks, will be on the cuff. Compliments of the management.”

“But—”

“It’s all set. You girls’ll have the best ringside table with orchids and a magnum of laughing-water. Look for you at nine-thirty.” He was backing out of the door, still talking. For once Miss Hildegarde Withers, caught between her real and assumed personalities, had nothing to say. Through her mind went nightmarish visions—the horrible idea of a bebop version of the *Bell Song*, herself being danced willy-nilly around the ballroom floor by some bobby-sox idol known as Blues Sandman, while out in La Porte, Indiana, the real Mrs. Goggins was no doubt listening at her fireside. The schoolteacher shuddered helplessly.

But Jeeps leaped, like Horatius to the bridge, “Just a *minute*, Mr. Forrest. I’m not Mrs. Goggins’s daughter, I’m—I’m her companion and

business agent. Her fee for a personal radio appearance is *twenty thousand dollars.*"

The smile froze on Jerry Forrest's pudgy face, and he reached for the doorknob. "What—wha—" he gargled.

"She got *more* than that in money and merchandise last time," Jeeps continued with sweet reasonableness. "It will be cash in advance."

There was a long, stiff silence. "I—I'll have to let you know," he mumbled, then turned and fled. Miss Withers sat down in a big chair, fanning herself.

"Thank you," she said softly. "What a tangled web we weave—"

"You just have to know how to handle men," the girl announced. "You know, I think this is going to be *thrilling!*"

"Our tastes differ," the schoolteacher pointed out. "But never let it be said that Hildegarde Withers flinched from her bounden duty." She hitched up her bangles for the second time, and then grimly stalked out and down the corridor.

*Like a lamb going to the slaughter*, she said to herself. *Only this lamb has teeth and claws—I hope.*

She already had in her mind a rather clear picture of what Mr. Nemo would be like, a composite of the dreams of all women past girlhood: tall and smelling faintly of tobacco and soap, with the easy, smooth manners and the quiet dress of the high-class confidence man. He would be sure of himself, and wary—he would hold aloof, keeping his fire like a big-game hunter scorning smaller stuff and looking only for a prize head to add to his collection.

As the elevator reached the lobby floor Miss Withers stepped out briskly, not noticing that the operator had brought the car to a stop a fraction of an inch below the floor level, and forgetting that she was wearing heels twice the height to which she was accustomed. She gave a lady-like squeal as she fell forward—and then was caught in a man's arms.

"My dear lady, are you all right?" His voice was high but pleasant, with a mocking undercurrent of laughter in it. He was tall, gray at the temples and black at the mustache, with a profile still handsome though perhaps somewhat ravaged by time, and he was in formal day attire which Miss Withers had up to this time seen worn only by undertakers.

“Yes, thank you so much!” she gasped, as she got her balance again. Then, as he smiled engagingly and went on into the elevator with the rest of his party, she said softly to herself under her breath, *“Beginner’s luck!”*

*“Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein.”*

—Proverbs

## 5

NO TELEVISION SET RENDERS ITS flickering entertainment in the Hotel Grandee's Platinum Lounge. In place of a juke-box there is a languid marimba band from south of the border that breaks occasionally into a *paso doble* or a *tango*. The décor leans heavily toward polished chrome and black mirrors, and the diffused lighting is in so low a key that sometimes passers-by drop in not to drink but just to load their cameras.

Yet during the cocktail hour, which is nowadays anywhere between noon and nine p. m., the lounge is heavily patronized by guests of the hotel and by the general public—or at least that level of the general public which can relax over drinks priced at \$1.25 and up. Into this crowded, dark, sweet-smelling saloon marched Miss Hildegarde Withers the afternoon of her second day at the Grandee, feeling more than ever like a jackdaw in peacock's plumes.

She found a table and ordered white wine and seltzer from the brisk Filipino waiter, then settled down to a critical study of the place and its denizens. More women than men, unfortunately, but that was to be expected at this hour. Bits of brittle laughter, fragments of unrelated conversation came in a confusing medley from all directions. People talked of babysitters, high prices, income-tax refunds, and the worsening condition of their friends' morals or politics, with now and then an unfavorable word for psychoanalytical movies, those fellows down in Washington, or the Long Island Railroad.

Nobody mentioned murder at all.

For a long, long time Miss Withers sat there, while the ice slowly melted in her glass. *Like the Skeleton at the Feast!* she said to herself. Only nobody spoke to her, nobody noticed her.

Once she caught the eye of a pale and balding man across the room who seemed to be staring in her direction, but he immediately looked away and after a moment fell busily to scribbling on the back of the wine-list. *A poet*, she told herself. *He has descended from his ivory tower, taken a job with an advertising agency, and now comes every day to mingle with the hectic throng in search of inspiration.*

She wished, suddenly, that she had brought along something to read. But perhaps that would have been out of character. And besides, the light was bad.

“Madam!” said a gentle masculine voice at her shoulder, and she looked around hopefully, trying to smile an alluring smile. But it was only the waiter. “Would madam mind moving to a smaller table over there? I have a party of four—”

So she moved, a little flustered. It was a move that brought her closer to her poet with the wine-list, who now was staring at her again. She noticed out of the corner of her eye that he wasn’t a poet at all, but something much more interesting. The man had dumped some of the ink from his pen into the dregs of his highball, and now with the end of a match was busily engaged in doing a rapid wash drawing.

A few minutes later Miss Withers realized with a start that he was doing a drawing of her!

She caught her breath, and took a good sip of the white wine and seltzer, choking a little. Could this be it? Somehow she had seen Mr. Nemo as a somewhat different type, handsomer, more debonair. But the sketch artist was striking, in a way. The nose was remarkable, jutting out like a jib. He was well-dressed, too—though colorlessly. He had a soft mouth, like a child’s, and long, stained fingers.

The next time he looked up from the drawing she stared him full in the face, and smiled brightly. “May I see it when it’s finished?” she said in a stage whisper. The direct approach.

He hastily began to gather up his belongings. *I’ve scared him off!* she told herself.

And then he came over to her table. “You can see it now,” he said in a voice that was spiced with a dash of south-European accent. “Hope you don’t mind my taking the liberty—”

“Not at all!” she cried. The drawing was strangely provocative, an excellent likeness in spite of all it left out, and subtly flattering. “How nice,” Miss Withers told him.

“Of ordinary models I am tired,” he said simply. “Your bones are beautiful.”

“My—my bones?”

“Yes. Have you ever sat?”

“Sat? Why, I’m sitting now—oh, you mean for a portrait?”

The man nodded. “My name is Jonathan, not Jonathan anything, just Jonathan. I pick it myself because my original one sounds like something scrambled. I am a Czech. In the old country I paint murals, but here—one needs money. So I paint portraits. I have a garret on East Forty-Ninth near the river. All day long I paint portraits of beautiful, simpering women. You come see my place sometime, no? I paint you.”

“Really? How very flattering!”

“Yes,” he told her. “Because you have beautiful bones, I want to paint you.” He looked at her, like a numismatist studying a blackened old Etruscan coin. “I charge the others five thousand dollars because they simper. You I paint for half price, because of the bones.” He handed her a business card, bearing only a pen self-portrait and an address.

“Why—I’ll have to think about it.”

“Think—and come soon,” Jonathan told her, and abruptly left, taking the wine-card sketch with him. Miss Withers wondered if his hasty departure had anything to do with the fact that a burly man whom she correctly took to be one of the hotel’s house detectives had just entered the lounge and was strolling between the tables with elaborate unconcern.

*Dear me!* she said to herself. *For a minute I almost thought—*

The waiter left a service tray on her table for a moment and she managed to get rid of her own drink by dumping it into an empty popcorn bowl. Then she caught sight of a familiar profile approaching. Today, she noticed approvingly, he was wearing a dark pin-stripe suit and a bright boyish tie, with the inevitable fresh gardenia. Summoning her courage, she waved and cried, “Yoo-hoo!”

There wasn’t another unoccupied chair in the place except the one at her table, and the big man sank into it gratefully. “What ho!” he said. “No ill effects from yesterday?”

“No, but I do want to thank you properly for your gallantry. Last night I’m afraid I was too shaken up and upset—”

“Not at all!” He snapped his fingers with quiet authority. “Waiter, a double brandy and water for me. And what are you drinking, Mrs.—?” He’d noticed the Woolworth wedding ring, then.

“Sherry,” she said quickly. “I’ll have a dry Goggins. I mean, I’m Mrs. Goggins and I’ll have a dry sherry.” This was no time to get buck fever.

“Amontillado,” he told the waiter. “Haven’t we met before somewhere, Mrs. Goggins? I’m Peter Temple.”

His high, pleasant voice lingered so lovingly on the name that Miss Withers took a chance and said, wide-eyed, “Not *the* Peter Temple?”

It was a snap shot, but dead on target. Even in the semi-darkness she could see the handsome, ravaged face light up like a neon sign. “Dear lady! Don’t tell me you remember? Not everyone does, nowadays.”

“Oh, yes!” she gushed. “I thought so last night—but I wasn’t quite sure, and I hadn’t my glasses.” Staring raptly into his face, she probed her excellent memory and finally out of the ghosts of the departed past there came scenes like bits of film from the dust of the cutting-room floor, flashes of the profile on magazine covers and billboards, glimpses through the smeared windshield of a Time Machine. Of course! Along with Francis X. Bushman and Norman Kerry and Charlie Ray, one Peter Temple had swaggered his brief hour and made his pantomimic love to Clara Kimball Young and Norma Talmadge and Mary Miles Minter, in the days of the Silents.

*Good heavens, isn’t he dead?* was her first thought. But no, he was here, waiting for her to say something. “You were wonderful in uniform,” she sighed softly. That ought to be safe; in those early movies the leading men wore costume most of the time.

Temple smiled approvingly, and toasted her with what was left of the brandy and water. “Dear lady! Then you remember *Hearts of the Mounted*, *Soldier of the Legion*, and *Singing Swords*—?”

“They don’t make pictures like that any more,” sighed Miss Withers with complete truthfulness. “By the way, Mr. Temple, perhaps the reason you thought we’d been introduced somewhere was that you’ve seen some of *my* publicity. I too was in *Arcady*—”

“Remember that duel I fought with Jack Gilbert in *Nights of Madness*? ”

“You see,” she continued with polite persistence, “I’m *the* Mrs. Goggins, who guessed that Miss Whosit on that radio program was really Elizabeth Arden with a cold. Now I’m here in the big city for a sort of spree—I guess you could call me a merry widow!”

Peter Temple put down his glass and turned to her suddenly, shaking his head. “No, dear lady. I wasn’t in *Merry Widow*. Perhaps you’re thinking

of *She Loves a Captain*, that Graustark story I did for Essanay before I went over to Imp?"

So it went. Miss Withers found that she didn't have to worry about what to say, nor about disposing of her sherry. All that was required of her was to sit quietly and listen while Peter Temple put away one double brandy after another and wandered in a happy monologue down Memory Lane.

Nor was there any end, apparently. At long last the thwarted schoolteacher looked at her watch and cried, "Oh, heavens! I've a ticket for the theater, and I don't want to miss the first act or I'll never know what it's all about." She beckoned to the hovering Filipino, concealing in her lap the folded five-hundred-dollar bill with which she hoped to cinch the impression she had made. "Now don't say no, Mr. Temple. This just must be *my* party!"

His smile was quick and easy. "But I wouldn't think of it!" From his pocket Temple produced a black pin-seal wallet heavy with gold initials, and took out a single currency note. "Take it out of this, waiter. Sorry I have nothing smaller."

It was a thousand-dollar bill. The Filipino shied away from it, shrugging helplessly. Then Temple rose. "They'll do it for me at the desk," he told Miss Withers. "You'll excuse me a moment?" He went out of the room, walking with rigid balance like a trapeze artist.

But he did not return, steadily or otherwise. After a lapse of time the schoolteacher fished around in her handbag and found a ten and a five, for which she got back from the waiter only a broad grin of thanks. It had been her party, after all.

That was on a Wednesday. On Monday next Inspector Oscar Piper, looking a little more worn than usual from a week-end of worrying about how best to roll with the next punch thrown by the new assistant-commissioner over in the Municipal Building, came down to his office with an additional maggot gnawing away in the back of his mind. He pressed the talk-box key on his desk. "Smith!"

"Good morning, Inspector," came the offensively cheery greeting.

"Smitty, you remember that dame who smeared herself all over the sidewalk outside the Grandee up on Park one night last summer? Barton, her name was."

“Sure I do. There didn’t seem to be anything that wasn’t kosher about it, so we marked the file Closed and sent it down to Records. The name was Bascom, Harriet Bascom.”

“So it’s Bascom!” Nowadays the Inspector was continually having bits of unimportant detail slip his mind, but he didn’t especially relish being corrected. “Get the file,” he ordered.

“Okay. Something new on the case? I didn’t think—”

“No! I just want to refer to it in my memoirs I’m writing!” He hit the key savagely, cutting off the conversation. Back when he was a sergeant there hadn’t been any back talk when an inspector gave an order, not to his face anyway. But that had been twenty—well, never mind how many years ago it had been.

When the Bascom folder arrived he declared himself incommunicado for a couple of hours, plowing methodically through this last memorial to the little librarian page by page and paragraph by paragraph, coming up at last against a stone wall.

He wasn’t the only one. Far uptown in an ornate suite on the nineteenth floor of the Hotel Grandee two innocents abroad were brunching on a double order of eggs Benedict, neither showing much appetite. It was really a council of war, a meeting of the joint chiefs of staff to review a bewildering series of defeats.

“I must have done something wrong,” the schoolteacher was saying. “But I can’t imagine what. Certainly it isn’t my charms, or lack of them. Because I have a very clear idea of the type of man we’re after and how he must operate. A Bluebeard, eloping with women for what money they have and then disposing of them after he gets his hands on it, isn’t interested in pulchritude. As Mrs. Josie Goggins, the merry widow from La Porte, Indiana, I should be the perfect target for his attentions. But he doesn’t seem to want to play.”

Jeeps was sympathetic. “It’s certainly all over the hotel by now, about who you are—I mean who you’re supposed to be. Because I showed Tad the newspaper clipping.”

“*Tad?*”

“Yes, you can’t expect me to call anybody Thaddeus Belanger III. You know, he’s the tall one in the crew haircut, with the cute snub nose.”

“Oh, the bellboy!”

Jeeps flushed. "Well, he isn't going to remain a bellboy all his life. Someday he's going to be manager of this hotel."

"Indeed! So that's where you were last evening."

"We only went to the Roxy, and then had some Chinese spareribs and stuff. I pumped him *shamelessly* about the hotel. But he doesn't remember my aunt staying here at all. The only one of the four missing women he does remember is Brinker, the nurse. Because of the poodle, you know. It was always getting loose and jumping on people in the lobby, and the management *finally* asked her to get rid of it or move."

Miss Withers was getting interested. "Did you think to ask him if he happened to remember seeing her with anybody, I mean any of the male guests?"

"I did, and he didn't. But he says she used to get all dressed up to the teeth and then go out in the evening with the dog on a leash and not come back until late."

"Poor Ethel Brinker isn't the first woman who's discovered that going around in public with a friendly dog is a quick way of widening one's acquaintance. I have an idea that she didn't have to spend many of those evenings alone." Miss Withers shook her head. "We face a very clever and cautious antagonist, child. Mr. Nemo seems to have covered his tracks well. I shouldn't be surprised if he had managed to meet his dates somewhere outside the hotel on some pretext or other."

"Look," Jeeps cried suddenly. "Suppose the reason he hasn't nibbled at the bait is that he's finally moved his base of operations?"

"Then we're sunk. We can't shop around," the schoolteacher pointed out. "There are too many other big hotels in this town, and my resources are dwindling rapidly. I really can't dig any deeper into my lifetime savings."

The girl nodded. "Or do you suppose that we were just unlucky enough to pick a time when Mr. Nemo was away somewhere disposing of his latest victim? Maybe he has a yacht and just dumps them overboard."

Miss Withers expressed doubts as to whether, even in the last stages of blind infatuation, a woman could be talked into taking a honeymoon cruise on Long Island Sound in January. "But of course he might be out of town. If we only had access to the records downstairs, and could find out what male guest checks in and out."

Both women sat in silence for a moment. "And I was so hopeful in the beginning," said the schoolteacher. "I mean, when I stumbled into Peter Temple's arms. He was just the type I had in mind: always polite to women and yet with just the faintest suggestion of brutality in his manner. But since I let him give me the slip in the cocktail lounge that evening I've seen him around the hotel several times and I have a feeling he's avoiding me."

"Then there was your artist," Jeeps said. "And the Russian—"

"Count Stroganyeff?" Miss Withers sighed, remembering all the trouble she'd taken to be caught with that massive Slav in the revolving door. She had very nearly ruined half of a perfectly good pair of opera pumps, and all she'd had for her pains was the thrill of having had her hand kissed for the first and no doubt the last time in her life. The man had been very gallant for ten minutes or so—and it had all climaxed with his giving her his card and telling her to get in touch with him if she felt like buying a pedigreed Borzoi. He could also get her a special price on Black Sea caviar in large lots. Another false alarm—

"Anyway," Jeeps said, "I just remembered that Aunt Alice didn't care for Russians White or red, because they always take you to places where you have to eat borscht and she was allergic to beets. She wouldn't have ever got involved with him."

"Perhaps not. Though they say love laughs at locksmiths and perhaps at allergies too. There were a few other gentlemen with whom I managed to scrape up an acquaintance, but most of them only wanted to show me pictures of their wives and children back home. Like the man who sat himself uninvited at my table the night I splurged and had supper in the Emerald Room, and it turned out that he didn't belong in the hotel at all but had only been dragged in on somebody's silver-wedding anniversary party."

"Maybe Mr. Nemo doesn't work the bars," Jeeps suggested. "He might make his pickups in the lobby or up in the mezzanine."

"I thought of that. No stone has been left unturned. I've loitered up there for hours, watching people go in and out of the Cathedral de Beauté and the smart little shops, pretending to write letters. But the only person who ever spoke to me was a nervous young woman who wanted me to mind her little boy while she telephoned, I think to her bookmaker."

"It's plumb depressing, that's what it is." Jeeps finished the coffee.

“The trouble is,” Miss Withers continued, “that most of the middle-aged men in this hotel already seem to have women firmly attached. Of course there’s the stocky man in dark spectacles. I keep running into him now and then, and he always stares in an interested sort of way. I stopped at the newsstand yesterday to buy a paper and he was browsing through some agricultural magazine. I took the bull by the horns—or is it the tail?—and ventured a friendly good afternoon at him, but he only nodded and then hurried away as if he thought I had bubonic plague.”

“Tough luck,” said Jeeps, with the easy sympathy of a girl who is confident that no man will ever willingly hurry away from her. She was lying now on the carpet and pedaling an imaginary bicycle upside down. “It’s all in the way you handle men,” she said. “Now just take Tad. I’ve got him right where I want him. You’ll see—he’s coming up when he goes on duty around noon.”

Miss Withers sat up straight. “Coming here? Then shouldn’t you get out of those flaming pajamas and put on your maid’s uniform?”

“Nope. You see, last night when he was telling me all about how he really wasn’t a bellboy but just getting experience so he could work up to manager someday, I sort of let down my hair and told him about me. Oh, not the *really* me. But I let him in on the secret that I’m not your maid. I’m just a struggling young radio actress who was hired by the sponsors of the Miss Whosit program to *play* the part for a while. It’s supposed to be a harmless conspiracy to get you married off. I’m to get a bonus and a contract if I’m successful, and I told Tad maybe he could help.”

“But why? I don’t—”

“I told him that they want to put the wedding on the air, so that they can announce that in addition to the house and the airplane and the chinchilla coat and all the rest of the stuff Mrs. Goggins won, they also gave her a husband. Sounds plausible, doesn’t it?”

“Daughter of Ananias!” whispered the schoolteacher. “Yes, I suppose it’s quite as believable as most of what seems to happen on those radio programs. But—”

“He swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. Tad is on our side. He’s even going to slip me a list of all the eligible males who live here in the hotel. Don’t you see, Mr. Nemo’s name is bound to be on that list? We can check ‘em off one by one.” Jeeps dropped to the floor again, and kicked her legs

comfortably in the air. "You're not supposed to know what's going on of course, so when Tad comes, maybe—"

"I'll make myself scarce," the schoolteacher agreed. She suffered Jeeps to apply a bit of rouge to her face and lips, and then donned the chinchilla coat and went out. Walking down to Grand Central, she invested a ten-dollar bill in small change and then denned up with it in a telephone booth, surrounded by telephone directories for Queens and Long Island. The number of boarding-kennels listed was rather on the appalling side, but she took a deep breath and started in.

Because somewhere on the other side of the East River there was a prisoner, a dog—no doubt small, dirty-white, with pink, runny eyes, as the Inspector had said—which represented the last link with one of the four missing women whom she was sworn to avenge. Ethel Brinker had taken the poodle out there, by request of the Grandee management, during her brief stay at the hotel. It might very well have been after she had met Mr. Nemo and fallen into his snare. Miss Withers fondly believed that even the cleverest of murderers must make a mistake sometime, somewhere. Perhaps the man had gone out there with her to help deliver the dog. Stranger things had happened.

Two hours and more than nine dollars later the schoolteacher, worn and a little giddy from the closeness of the booth, dropped what was almost her last coin in the slot and called the number of an establishment in Babylon bearing the incredible name of Elysian Fields Doghaven. This time she got a great deal more than her dime's worth. There was a roaring as of mighty waters in her ear, which finally resolved itself into the excited, faintly cockney accents of a man whose patience was exhausted.

"Yes, a Miss Ethel Brinker left her tyke here to board, and it's about time somebody did something about the bloody nuisance because I want to get it off our hands right now, and besides there's two months board owing and I'm not running no home from home for dogs, not charity-like. When she left it here with us she said it would only be for a couple of weeks and she said she'd send money to pay the tick and tell us where to ship the blasted bloody animal—"

"She was planning a trip, then?"

"Right you are. She said she'd read that there was a rabies epidemic where she was going, and didn't want to take her precious Talley-walley

there until it was safe. But this time of year there's no rabies anywhere, and the dog won't stay any place we put it. A regular Houdini, he is."

"I'm very sorry," Miss Withers said quickly. "But I didn't know. I'm handling Ethel's affairs for her while she's away. I'm her—her sister." All women are sisters, she told her conscience, and if she wasn't handling poor Ethel Brinker's affairs, then who was? She went on to explain that she had called only in hopes that he had heard something from the dog's owner. "She seems to have got herself mixed up with a man. By the way, was he with her when she came to bring out the animal?"

"No, ma'am," said the kennelman, whose named turned out to be Harris. "She never came here. We sent the truck into town to pick the dog up, and the thick-headed boy who drove it forgot to ask for a deposit. Now there's thirty-six dollars board bill and ten more for washing and clipping, and I want my money—"

"I'll certainly tell my sister, if I hear from her," Miss Withers promised him. "And would you please write down my name and telephone number, and let me know at once if you hear anything from her or about her?" She had expected an argument at this point, and the necessity of offering a small bribe, but Mr. Harris proved surprisingly amenable.

"Right you are. Hildegarde Withers, 32 West Seventy-Fourth, Longacre 8. . . ."

And that was that. In fishing through the ice, particularly thin ice like this, the more lines you set the better chance you have of a bite. She tacked back up Park in the teeth of a bitter north wind, taking deep breaths of the comparatively fresh air of Manhattan and feeling somehow encouraged.

Then as she passed the Waldorf a hatless figure in a grayish-green overcoat suddenly fell into step with her. "Good afternoon," said Jonathan. "Are you thinking?"

"Constantly," she answered, somewhat startled.

"About sitting? Mrs. Goggins, the light is very good today. I will paint you something like American Gothic; you will be holding a tall highball glass and turning up your nose at the smell. I will call the picture 'Sweet Poison for the Age's Tooth.'"

"That would be very nice," Miss Withers told him. "But I have other fish to fry."

"Perfect! I will paint you with a fish on a platter, sniffing it!"

“Not today,” she said kindly.

“Then think about it, Mrs. Goggins. Remember, I like your bones.” He turned back, and the schoolteacher went on toward her hotel, somewhat subdued.

As she came back into the Grandee lobby she gave a quick look round, but there was no sign of any of her hot prospects. Count Stroganyeff was chatting with the big dark-haired girl who ran the theater-ticket counter, and it appeared that he was about to kiss her hand or make a good try at it. But there was nobody else in sight. Miss Withers shrugged her shoulders and continued on toward the elevators. Perhaps Jeeps Davidson had had a productive afternoon.

Jeeps had. In fact, she was still having it. As Miss Withers unlocked her door and entered the suite she had a brief glimpse of the girl and Tad Belanger III as they sprang suddenly apart. The bellboy turned slightly pink around the neck and ears as he mumbled something and took a hasty departure, but as he passed the schoolteacher she noticed that he stared at her with an added interest. *Wondering how hard it will be to get me married off for the benefit of a radio program's Roman holiday*, she said to herself.

When the door had closed behind him, Miss Withers looked sternly at Jeeps. “I happen to stand *in loco parentis*, young woman. Therefore I feel a certain sense of responsibility for you. I suppose he was taking a cinder out of your eye?”

“Nope. I was kissing him. The first kiss.”

“And he's been here all this time? I thought the younger generation had a lower boiling point than that.”

“This was his second visit today,” Jeeps explained. “I prevailed upon him to go downstairs and find out something for me and he did, so I kissed him. You would too. Anyway, this noon he brought me a list of the eligible bachelors who live in the hotel. It was a letdown. Most single men who stop here are transients. Among the permanent guests are Mr. Temple, and Count Stroganyeff, and two men who room together and design fabrics, and a publisher whose wife is in the Virgin Islands getting a divorce, and Mr. Forrest the public relations man—he gets free rent as part of his retainer—and a tenor at the Met—”

“No,” decided Miss Withers. “Mr. Nemo couldn't have a regular business or profession, or he wouldn't have to resort to wholesale murder

for money."

"I know. But listen. I asked Tad to go back and find out which if any of those men on the list was in the habit of checking out of the hotel and in again. So he did. None of them were—I mean was. But don't look so downcast, it's better than that. The man doesn't check out, he has his suite on a monthly rate. But he's away on an average of one week in the month, sometimes more."

"*Who is?* The suspense is terrible."

"This man gets a fresh flower for his buttonhole every morning when he's here, and has it charged. But there are thirty days in most months, and this girl that Tad knows—I mean *used* to know—in the flower-shop says that he averages only about twenty gardenias—"

"I think I'll turn you over my knee—" Miss Withers began. Then she gasped. "*Gardenias?*"

Jeeps nodded, like a solemn little owlet. "I was waiting for you to guess. Your beginner's luck was lucky after all."

"No, it can't be Peter Temple, it just can't!"

"Aunt Alice checked out of this hotel on October eleventh. Temple was away somewhere on the twelfth, because the girl at the ticket counter told Tad he had a pair of seats for the opening of a new musical, and didn't pick them up!"

Miss Withers frowned thoughtfully. "Still—oh, I admit that at one time I was sure he was our man. An ex-movie star with no visible means of support, in love with himself as all actors have to be, could very well turn into a mass-murderer. But I gave him every opportunity, and he didn't strike at the bait."

"Maybe you were just a little eager. Or too intelligent?"

"Which is your nice way of saying that I flung myself at his head, that I'm not much of an actress, and that I scared him off!" The schoolteacher had a faraway look in her eye. "You know, I remember reading somewhere that even tigers turn to being man-killers only when they are past their prime and slowing up."

"That's right—that's Temple. Now do we go down to Headquarters again?"

"If we came to the Inspector with only vague suspicions, I think he'd send us over to Bellevue for observation. But I was about to remark that if I

had ten minutes alone in a tiger's lair I might very probably stumble on a bone or two. Do you happen to know the number of Mr. Temple's suite?"

"It's 12C30. But you don't dare! And what could you hope to find?"

"I'll know it when I see it," Miss Withers pronounced. "Perhaps I'll have better luck as a snoop than I did as a siren."

Success in crime, the schoolteacher felt, could result only from a meticulous regard for the details of preparation, and then from the boldest execution. *My strength is as the strength of ten, because my heart is pure—or at least my intentions are good*, Miss Withers was saying to herself as a little after nine-thirty that evening she got out of the elevator on the fourteenth floor and walked down one flight, with Jeeps close behind.

Peter Temple, favorite in the Mr. Nemo stakes, was presumably headed for the theater, as Jeeps reported that she had seen the man, in full tails and white tie, go through the lobby and out into a taxi.

In her handbag Miss Withers carried a pencil-sized flashlight, and a ring of keys—the last item representing the greatest triumph of all. In her travels around the hotel she had noticed that the housekeepers and floor-maids when doing up a suite of rooms usually left a ring of keys stuck in the lock of the half-open door. So tonight it had only been a matter of cruising up and down the halls until they found a linen-cart parked outside an open door, which meant that some guest had made a late departure and that the stand-by housekeeper was readying the rooms again. All that was required was a brief pause to make sure that the women were working out of sight in the bedroom, a touch of nimble footwork and light fingers, and a triumphant departure with the keys.

Jeeps looked at Miss Withers with a new respect. "You're rather good at this sort of thing," she said. "Lucky for society you lined up with law and order."

There were a dozen keys on the ring, but the first one opened the door of 12C30. "A good omen," Miss Withers whispered, as she handed the ring back to Jeeps. "Now you scoot and replace these before they're missed."

"But I want to—"

"Never mind. You're the lookout. Sit yourself down with a magazine in one of the chairs in the little foyer by the elevators, right by the house phone. If Peter Temple comes back, or if one of the house detectives ambles

by, grab the phone and ring this room. That will give me a chance to get out—I hope."

"And what if you don't?"

"Then it's every man for himself and devil take the hindmost. You slip out of the hotel and grab the first train for Bagley's Mills. Hurry, now."

So it was that Miss Withers entered the lair of the tiger. Her memories of the place were always to be somewhat vague and confused, perhaps because she dared not turn on the lights and had to depend on the tiny flash. She retained an impression of a room filled with dozens of photographs, mostly of Temple himself, whose eyes seemed to follow her. Even the walls had been papered with old three-sheets advertising bygone films—all around the room Peter Temple marched across the sand dunes with the French Foreign Legion, rode horseback into the Arctic with the Mounties, and crossed rapiers with Richelieu's hired assassins. Here and there were signs of past or present affluence; the big portable bar in the corner was well stocked, and there was a mammoth phonograph-television set between the windows. The only lethal weapons were a pair of crossed sabers above the fake fireplace, but the blades showed no more signs of actual use than did the polo mallets and pith helmet casually standing in the entrance.

*It isn't a room, it's a stage set*, Miss Withers decided, and went on into the bedroom. It was very like her own upstairs, except that in place of twin beds there was an oversized double. Two fat trunks stood against the far wall, and there was a desk loaded with bundles of letters in feminine handwriting. She pounced eagerly, but they turned out to be mash-notes, written in purple adolescent prose. One began *My shiek!* Several held snapshots of young pretty girls with hair bundled oddly around their ears, bathing-suits running to skirt and flounce, dresses which hung straight from shoulder to knee, making them look like something drawn by a cartoonist of yesterday—was it John Held Jr.?

Miss Withers blinked, and then looked at the envelopes. The stamps were the wrong color. Then she saw that the most recently mailed letter had been postmarked May 4th, 1929.

One look told the schoolteacher that the trunks were full of scrapbooks, of interest only to Peter Temple or possibly his mother. The desk drawers were a magpie's nest of old bills, canceled checks, cigarette lighters that didn't work, and similar trinkets. In one, pushed far to the rear,

was a little box containing a small-sized ring cut of some dull green stone and bearing the initials *C.L.A.* Miss Withers caught her breath. Could that *A* just possibly stand for Atkins, which was one of the four names engraved on her memory?

There were pictures of Peter Temple here too, on desk and bureau, one or two showing him as he was today. She more or less expected to find more in the gleaming black bathroom, but here she drew almost an absolute blank. Not only were there no pictures, there were no little boxes or bottles with a druggist's label which might suggest where Temple went when he was out of town. Only the usual shaving materials, a toothbrush which told her that the man wore store-teeth, a bottle of aspirin, and a tiny mascara brush with which presumably he darkened that tiny mustache.

She came back into the bedroom again, pausing uncertainly. There must be something that she had overlooked.

Then a key clicked in the outer door. Conquering an impulse to scream, she whipped instantly into the nearest closet, working her way far back among the masculine suits and coats, and breathing a compound of cleaning fumes and tobacco and dust. She waited there, trembling, for a long time.

Someone was moving around in the parlor, someone with a heavy male tread. She racked her brains trying to think why Peter Temple could have left the theater in the middle of the second act to rush back home. Of course he might have forgotten something. But why hadn't Jeeps sounded the alarm? Unless the switchboard, with the satanic malignity of all inanimate objects, had chosen this moment to jam itself up with calls.

Miss Withers heard the bedroom door open, and the click of the light. She squeezed herself still farther back into the recesses of the closet, trying to look as much as possible like an old overcoat.

There was an eternity of suspense, and then the light snapped out again, the door closed. She waited, and then there was the wonderful relief of hearing the outer door slam. The schoolteacher uncrossed her fingers and came out of the closet. *My guardian angel must be working full time*, she told herself.

Then the phone rang. "Now she tells me!" Miss Withers said, and continued picking her way out of the place. She was following the feeble beam of her flash across the parlor, three or four steps from the hall door

and safety when the lights came on. She whirled in shocked surprise to face the muzzle of a very nasty-looking pistol held casually in the hand of a man who only a day or so ago she had thought too diffident even to speak to her. Now, through the amber lenses, his eyes were cold and ophidian.

“What’s your hurry, sister?” he said, and his voice was like old sandpaper. “You’ve been where you’re going.”

*“He who lies down with dogs gets up with fleas.”*

—Mexican proverb

## 6

FOR ALL THE STUDIED INFORMALITY OF the evening conference, the open boxes of cigars, and the comfortable leather chairs grouped around the table, the air in the Commissioner's office snapped with tension. The Old Man himself blew a fat smoke ring, sent another deftly through it, and said, "Of course, we won't make a final decision without considering all your objections."

Of which the Inspector had a complete set.

"Look at it this way," put in Kiley. The new assistant-commissioner was a blue-blood, still retaining a good deal of Harvard Law School and of Harvard accent, and Oscar Piper hated him cordially. "You've been a bureau chief for a good many years. It's a grueling job on Homicide, with lots of night work."

"I'm not complaining. Is anybody else?"

The Old Man answered that. "No! But none of us is as young as we used to be. It's about time you thought about taking it easy. This new job that Mr. Kiley has created seems tailored just to fit. You'll have nominal authority over—"

Piper muttered something impolite and unprintable.

"You'll have to admit that times are changing," Kiley went on.

"Murder hasn't changed," the Inspector said. "Not since Cain."

The Old Man coughed, and Kiley smiled with his thin lips only. "Yes, yes, of course. Let's see, how long have you got to go for retirement, Inspector?"

As if he didn't know, with the papers there in front of him. "Four years and three months," said Piper. "And if you think I want to waste it sitting around doing administrative work, signing my initials to other men's reports —"

A chief inspector at the other end of the table said, "But it isn't a demotion, Oscar. And the time has come when we have to think of streamlining the Department."

It was Oscar Piper's private opinion that there had been too damn much streamlining of things already in this world we live in, but before he

could say so he was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. Dan Kiley, nearest the desk, picked it up. He listened for some time, and then turned toward the Inspector. "It's your office," he announced, in a cool, amused tone. "Sergeant Smith says that he hates to interrupt, but there's a certain protégé of yours, whom he doesn't need to mention by name, who's been held up at Lexington Avenue station under the alias of Josephine Goggins. The charge will be prowling rooms in the Hotel Grandee, illegal entry, and larceny. She's on the other phone, he says, and she wants to be sprung right away."

The Inspector almost tore the phone from Kiley's hand.

"Smitty?" he roared. "Just forget it!"

"You don't want me to—"

"No!"

"But what'll I tell her?"

"Tell her I'm out of town!" Piper crashed down the instrument in its cradle and stalked back to his chair, ears and neck flaming. "Sorry. Where were we?"

"I was speaking of the possible advantages of new blood in the Homicide Bureau," Kiley went on. "Speaking of methods, Inspector, it's been brought to my attention that sometimes in the past you've shown an inability to keep amateur busybodies out from underfoot. Of course, results are all that count in investigation work, but all the same we ought to get those results without outside help or hindrance. Now from what I've seen on my comparatively brief tour of duty down here—"

The Old Man coughed. "All right, Mr. Kiley. I think we'd better leave this up in the air until tomorrow. Maybe when the Inspector here sleeps on the idea he'll come around to our way of thinking."

"That'll be the day the bands play *Rule Britannia* for the St. Patrick's Day parade," said Inspector Oscar Piper, but he said it to the revolving doors as he came bursting out of the Municipal Building. He was so hot under the collar that he walked uptown all the way home, arriving there still sore as a boil and with aching legs and feet. He was not by nature a vindictive man, but he couldn't help feeling that it was high time that Hildegarde had a much-needed lesson. Exposed all night in the station-house tank to the screams of alcoholics and hopheads and to the raucous

jibes of water-front Magdalenes, the schoolteacher might once and for all get a bellyful.

Such was his mood that the Inspector hunted around the place until he found a fifth of rye still in its Christmas wrappings, poured out a stiff four fingers into a tall glass, and filled it up with lemon juice, a dash of sugar and hot water. Then he went to bed with the toddy and *Gulliver*, getting little enough comfort from either.

Meanwhile, over on Park Avenue where the tower of the Grandee shoots its light-riddled bulk up into the sky, a girl in a trench-coat and a young man in a tight brass-buttoned jacket were sitting close together on the steps of a service stair. Tad Belanger, being a stubborn young man, was deeply involved in an argument. Jeeps Davidson, being a reasonable and clear-sighted young woman, saw no use whatever in prolonging the discussion, as she had long ago made up her mind that he was going to give in anyway.

“All I want to know,” he repeated doggedly, “is this. What’s it all about? What was she doing in his rooms, and how did she get there?”

“That’s beside the point. Are you going to do what I ask, or not?”

“You’re only a woman,” Tad said.

“So I’m a woman? Is that bad?”

“You don’t understand these things. It—it’s a matter of echelon. If you’d been in the Army, God forbid, you’d see that it’s like telling a corporal to walk in on the colonel and ask the old boy how the battle maneuvers went today.”

Jeeps leaned a little closer. “There’s a way you *could* get by with it. You’d have to pretend that you came to bring information, not to get it.” And she explained. Then she leaned toward him, so that their mouths almost but not quite touched, and she blew her warm breath in his ear and flicked her eyelashes shamelessly against his cheek.

Tad leaped away, as from a hot stove. “Jeepers, Jeeps!” Then he drew a deep breath. “All right, all right! Don’t cry, little girl. I’ll buy your damn violets. But to think that you’re the type of woman who has to resort to mere physical appeal—”

He shook his head and departed. Jeeps happily held up thumb and forefinger in a good-luck gesture. Then her eyes widened. “What do you mean, ‘*mere*’?”

Tad Belanger went briskly down to the mezzanine floor and then walked to the extreme end of a long hallway, pausing at last before a door whose panels were bare of any identifying mark. He hitched up his pants, sucked in his stomach, and then knocked. Almost immediately there was a clicking sound as the lock was released, and he went in wishing fervently that he was someplace else.

It was one of the Grandee's regular two room-and-bath suites, except that what should have been the living-room had been fitted up with plain oak office furniture and metal filing-cabinets. Through an open door could be seen the bedroom, fitted out as bachelor living-quarters. All the lights were blazing.

There was a big flat-topped desk in the middle of the room, now piled high with books, pamphlets, catalogues, two telephones, and a sign reading *Max F. Brady, Chief of Security*. Behind the desk, reading a flower catalogue without his glasses, sat a stocky, well-fed man somewhere on the sunny side of fifty, wearing boiled shirt, black tie, and suspenders. His tuxedo jacket hung neatly on the back of a chair within easy reach, but he stopped going through the motions of putting it on when he saw who his visitor was.

"I didn't ring," Brady said, without any expression at all.

Tad was standing more or less at attention. "I know, sir. But I wanted to see you about the trouble we had on the twelfth floor tonight."

The older man put down the catalogue, which was open to a page filled with color photographs of incredible giant asters and zinnias. He wasn't exactly frowning, but his features leaned a little in that direction. "Just how did you happen to know about the incident, Belanger? It is Belanger, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Brady." Tad swallowed. "You know how rumors get around in a big hotel."

"I do indeed. Go on."

"I heard about it only a few minutes ago, from one of the boys. And I thought there was something you ought to know—something that may have a bearing on the case."

"Couldn't you have reported it to your bell-captain?"

"Ordinarily I would, Mr. Brady. But I thought this was something you ought to know first-hand."

“You thought, did you? Since when have bellboys been thinking? Oh, yes. You’re one of those G.I. on-the-job trainees, sweating it out for assistant-manager. Well, Belanger, I’m listening.”

The man spoke with that patronizing, Olympian condescension that some adults use with small children, but Tad bit his lip and went bravely on. “It was Mrs. Goggins in 19A22 who got arrested, wasn’t it? Well, I’ve been suspicious of her and her maid since they checked in last week. They’re both as phony as a three-dollar bill.”

“What makes you think so?”

“When they arrived the maid was laying it on thick with a stage French accent—the *oo-la-la, oui-madame* stuff. The next day she was talking like anybody else. And she bunked in a twin bed right in the room with her mistress, and ate off the same tray. That didn’t look kosher to me.”

“Sit down, Belanger.” Brady waved his hand toward a chair. “Go on.”

“So I took Gigi—that’s what she calls herself—to the movies the other night. I was off duty, and I thought I might find out something. Anyway, I learned that she’d never been in France in her life. She claimed to come from Los Angeles, but she didn’t know the Hollywood Bowl from the La Brea tar pits.”

“Neither do I,” Brady admitted. “But I gather there’s a difference.” He nodded slowly. “Yes, we should have picked ’em both up. That must have been the maid, then, who was hanging around the elevators on the twelfth floor, while the Goggins woman was in Temple’s rooms. Is this Gigi a kind of pert, kittenish jailbait, blond and running to legs?”

“Yessir,” Tad admitted slowly. “You might describe her that way.”

Brady rubbed his chin. “Playing lookout, of course. Only she didn’t figure me—she was looking for somebody a little more on the house-dick type.”

“They weren’t professionals, were they, sir? I figured the old girl was just a harmless nut of some kind.”

Brady seemed to think that was funny. “Harmless! That Goggins woman has been making a nuisance of herself around the hotel ever since she arrived. Man-crazy, I guess. But now she’s going up the river for a long stretch on a larceny rap. Look here.” He took a brown envelope out of his desk drawer, opened it, and showed Tad a ring of green stone and a small framed picture. “Here’s what she was trying to get away with, out of Peter

Temple's bedroom. A solid-gold picture frame and a jade ring worth several hundred dollars."

"But the initials are C.L.A.," Tad said, puzzled.

"Caspar L. Augspieler is Temple's real name, though naturally he doesn't want it known." Brady put the exhibits away again. "When he comes home tonight I'll have him identify this stuff, and then it goes to the District Attorney's office."

"Oh," said Tad a little flatly. He started to rise.

But the older man held up his hand. "One of the most important things about running a big hotel successfully is to be able to judge people, and to spot the wrong kind of guests. I used to be on the detective division over in Jersey City—fourteen years in plain clothes—and that's why when this hotel opened last spring I was offered the job of second assistant-manager, in charge of security. You've shown that you're on your toes, Belanger. I guess you won't be hopping bells much longer."

"Thank you, sir."

Brady looked at him critically. "You're not a bad-looking kid. Just the type that a little twirp like this Gigi might fall for. If you run into her again, work on her. Find out where she lives, or spot her in a bar or restaurant, and phone me. I'll have her picked up. I want this hotel to have the reputation of being poison for people like that, see?"

"I—I guess so."

"Especially women. Eighty percent of the trouble in hotels is caused by women on the loose."

"You sound like a woman-hater, sir."

Brady shrugged. "Always been too busy. When I'm not working, I have a little farm down in Hunterdon County that keeps me busy. Weekends this summer I'm going to dig up the pasture acreage with a tractor and then re-seed with this new ladino grass. . . ."

It was twenty minutes later when Tad finally managed to break away. He stopped outside the door to mop his brow and to think. Then he went slowly back to the landing on the service stair, where Jeeps Davidson was waiting. She looked extremely small, cold, sleepy, and despondent.

"I found out for you," he told her abruptly. "The charge is burglary and/or grand larceny."

Jeeps shook her head. "*That's silly!*"

“Wait and see how silly it is. They’re going to send your friend Mrs. Goggins up to Auburn and throw the key away. And that’s not all. Somehow Brady’s got the idea that you’re in it too. He wants me to keep an eye out for you, so you can get arrested and be sent up with her as an accessory.”

“Well, I *was!*” Jeeps cried. “But I didn’t dream they had mirrors set in the halls so they could spy on people. And I thought Mr. Brady was a guest because he always went around with a hat and coat on, so I didn’t sound the alarm until I saw two of his underlings coming out of the elevator, and by then it was too late.”

“You actually admit you played lookout?” Tad’s face was pale.

She nodded. “Of course. But wait until you hear why—”

“I’ve heard plenty. I wouldn’t believe you if you said it was snowing. I know I shouldn’t do this, but I can’t help it. I’m going to give you ten minutes head start to get out of this place, because I haven’t the heart to see a pretty brat like you go to prison.”

“Tad!” Jeeps came closer, smiling, a faint, sad smile. “*Thank* you, darling. Why couldn’t I have met you earlier, before it was too late? But try not to think harshly of me. I got into the mob when I was but a *child*, and now it’s too late to turn back. It’s best that you forget me.” And she kissed him.

“Jeeps! Gigi—Alice—or whatever your name is—” he began, when he could talk. “Where’ll you go? Have you got any money? I—”

“There’s an underworld hideout at 32 West Seventy-Fourth Street, second floor, rear,” she said out of the corner of her mouth. “Come up and see me sometime—knock three times and ask for Gentle Alice.” Then Jeeps kicked him hard on the shin and turned and ran down the stair.

It was broad daylight when Inspector Oscar Piper awoke next morning. He arose still groggy with sleep, bathed sketchily, cut himself twice while shaving, and burned his breakfast toast. Even so, he lingered long over his coffee. So what if for once he was half an hour late? Maybe they’d find out down at Centre Street how balled up Homicide could get without him.

Then he heard the downstairs door open, and the slow lumbering tread of his housekeeper, the doddering Mrs. McFeeters. She never arrived until ten-thirty or so. He looked at his watch, which still said five to nine. It was

consistent anyway, because that was the way the hands had pointed when he got up.

“Run down,” he said. “Sweet Judas on a trapeze!” he cried suddenly, remembering where Hildegarde Withers had spent the night. By this time the hearing would be over and done with, and the poor old girl would be on her way to Women’s Detention downtown, held over for trial in Magistrate’s Court.

Seizing hat and coat, he ran out into the street and hailed a taxi. This was a more stringent object lesson than he had had in mind. His quick Irish rage had died in him overnight, and he felt sheepish and guilty as he ran up the steps of the Lexington Avenue station.

“You got a Hildegarde Withers in the lock-up?” he demanded of the uniformed man at the desk.

“No, Inspector.”

“Well, then—a Mrs. Goggins?”

“She’s gone.”

“Down to Detention?”

“Sprung.”

Piper blinked. “By who?”

“Don’t know, sir. Before I came on duty. Had to turn her loose—nobody showed up to make a complaint. The night wardress was sure sorry to see her go. Calmest evening in months. Before that woman was in the tank half an hour she had all those dames singing songs—*Moonlight Bay* and *Rose of Washington Square*, old corny stuff like that. She said it was a sight you’d never forget to see those old floozies singing away with the tears pouring down their faces.”

“I bet!” The Inspector picked up the desk phone, got an outside line, and dialed a number. The “Hello?” at the other end of the line was in all-too-familiar accents. He instantly hung up. Then he called his own office. “Smitty? any calls for me?”

“Not a thing, Inspector. All quiet on the western front.”

“Oh,” said Piper. “That’s good—I guess.”

“You taking the day off, sir?”

“I’m thinking,” said Inspector Oscar Piper fervently, “of taking off in a rocket ship for Mars or someplace, with a one-way ticket.” He hung up, and went out into the street. On the subway he found an early edition of an

afternoon paper conveniently abandoned on the seat, and while browsing idly through it he came on an item that he re-read three times:

#### MOVIE FAN HAS LONGEST MEMORY

*“This is just like old times,” said Peter Temple, once-famous star of the silents, when he learned last night that a feminine admirer had bribed a maid to let her into his suite at the exclusive Hotel Grandee and had been caught by hotel employees attempting to carry away a photograph of him as well as other souvenirs.*

*The woman, who gave her name as Josephine Moggins, 48, was held by police, but Temple gallantly refused to press charges. “I’ll even send her an autographed photo of myself,” said the still-handsome movie idol of yesteryear, “for reminding me of the good old days when at my premieres whole mobs of women used to drag me out of my Stutz Bearcat and carry me through the streets on their shoulders.” Temple is now making a comeback by way of personal appearances and television. His last motion picture was The Tattooed Duchess with Bebe Daniels, released to the public in 1926.*

A few minutes later, the clipping in his hand, the Inspector climbed the stairs of a remodeled brownstone on West 74th Street. After a slight pause to regain his breath, he rang the bell. It was opened by Jeeps Davidson, who stared at him blankly.

“Is she in?” he asked diffidently, somewhat like a small boy who has been told by his teacher to report at once to the principal’s office.

“Why, yes,” Jeeps answered. “But I’m afraid you can’t *see* her, Inspector.”

“Okay, okay. If she wants to take it that way, I’ll run along.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort!” came a clarion call from somewhere in the depths of the little apartment. “Oscar Piper, you come in and take your medicine! I’ll deal with you as soon as I’ve washed the smell of that awful police station off myself, and done something about my hair. I won’t be long.”

“Don’t hurry,” he said quietly. “I’ve got no place to go. Thanks to your SOS last night, I’m finally being kicked off my job anyway. Your phone

call went over big in the Commissioner's office last night when it was relayed to me out loud in front of everybody."

"*What?*" There was the sound of hurrying feet, and then an apparition in the doorway. Miss Withers was a pale, shocked ghost wrapped in a shapeless bathrobe, her hair dripping wet and colored in incredible streaks of brown, gray, and orange. "Oscar Piper, that isn't true!"

"Afraid it is. The new assistant-commissioner thinks that they need a younger man in charge of Homicide—somebody who can keep amateur busybodies out from underfoot and get results without outside help or hindrance."

Even Jeeps looked sympathetic, and Miss Withers shook her head wonderingly. "They are actually demoting you, after all these years?"

"It amounts to that," Piper said bitterly. "I'm to be kicked upstairs to a meaningless office job over with the Commissioner. Oh, they'll call me Acting Chief-Inspector, and I'll nominally be supervising three bureaus—vice, gambling, and narcotics. You know what they say about policemen assigned to vice, don't you? They retire in a few years with a couple of safety-deposit boxes crammed full of dirty money, and their fellow cops don't speak to them on the street."

"Oh, dear!" moaned Miss Hildegarde Withers. "No wonder you left me to rot in durance vile all night! And to think that I've caused all this trouble for everybody and accomplished absolutely nothing! It seemed such a good idea at the time, didn't it, Jeeps?"

The girl nodded sadly. "We were so *sure* it was Temple, because of his going away on those trips. But it seems he was only doing personal appearances in out-of-town night clubs and cafés."

"Wait a minute," put in the Inspector. "Would somebody mind telling me what this was all about? What in the blue bloody blazes were you trying to accomplish with this impersonation act over in the hotel?"

And so Miss Withers reluctantly gave him a brief and breathless version of their valiant attempt to beard the tiger in his lair, of how they had hoped to smoke out the mysterious murderer they called Mr. Nemo for lack of any other name, and of what a fiasco it had been from start to finish. "I was playing a hunch," she admitted. "But, Oscar, I felt it in my bones that someone had been hanging around the Grandee and picking up those poor,

lonely, unfortunate women and then somehow doing away with them. I certainly gave him every opportunity, but he just wouldn't pick me up!"

The Inspector was grinning in spite of himself. "It's just like the limerick about the old maid from St. Paul who went to a birth-control ball —"

"*Oscar!*"

"Okay, okay. Well, anyway, I hope you've learned your lesson. Never mind how your foolishness has affected me and my career. I guess I'll survive somehow. But for your own sake—"

"I know, I know," she cried contritely. "Oscar, I swear that never again as long as I live will I meddle in what doesn't concern me!"

He was edging toward the door. "I hope you mean it this time."

"But I do! And now please run along, Oscar. I want to finish my bath, and then Jeeps has promised to see what she can do about my hair."

The worn and weary schoolma'am had just settled herself down in the tub of warm water again when she heard a ring at the door. There were excited voices in the living-room and then Jeeps cried out, "Oh, Tad! How *super-wonderful!* Come quick, we've *got* to tell her!"

"No!" commanded Miss Withers. "Is nothing sacred?" But she climbed out again, and wrapped herself in the bathrobe. "What now?" she demanded, as she poked her head into the living-room.

"Listen to what Tad's discovered!" Jeeps sang out. The boy, in hat and overcoat which covered his uniform, looked older, more serious.

"I don't think I can stand anything more," said the schoolteacher. "Besides, I promised the Inspector—"

"*Please* listen! Tad's in it too, now. Because after I kicked him in the shins and ran away last night he caught me and made me tell. I mean about who you *really* are and what we were trying to find out!"

"Go away, young man," said Miss Withers dully. "The whole thing is a dismal failure anyway."

"But that's just the point," Tad Belanger said. "It isn't a failure. That's what I rushed over to tell you, Mrs. Goggins—I mean Miss Withers. After Jeeps gave me the fill-in last night, I got to thinking. I mean, thinking about what I'd do if I was your Mr. Nemo, hanging around the Grandee like a vulture waiting to pounce. I wouldn't take any chances. So anyway, I remembered that I know this girl—"

“You *Turk!*” Jeeps put in.

“I mean, used to know her—anyway, she’s a Tau Omega. That’s what we call telephone operators, and they’re most of them a sharp bunch of cookies. I got in touch with her this morning early—she’s a long-lines operator, and has easy access to the telephone company records. She just called me back and gave me all the dope. Miss Withers, would it interest you to know that on Sunday evening, the same week you checked into the hotel, somebody put through a long-distance call from the Grandee to La Porte, Indiana? It was a person-to-person call to Mrs. Josie Goggins, the real Mrs. Goggins, and when the operator finally located her and had her on the line, the caller only said, ‘Thanks,’ and hung up!”

“But—but from what room?” Miss Withers demanded. “Who was it?”

“A man,” Tad said. “Just a man—from a pay-phone booth in the lobby.”

There was a moment of utter silence. “Oh, my prophetic soul!” whispered Miss Withers. “Then there *is* a Mr. Nemo, just as I thought!”

“Only he was smart enough,” Jeeps added, “to check up before he grabbed the bait!”

“And,” the schoolteacher wailed, “while I’ve been masquerading around the hotel, he’s been watching and laughing!” She wearily pushed a damp lock of varicolored hair back from her forehead. “Oh, dear! I seem to have made the cardinal mistake of underestimating an opponent.”

“Me, I think you’re lucky,” Tad told her. “To be alive. I don’t think Mr. Nemo is laughing. I think he’s covering up and shaking in his boots, because he knows that someone is sniffing around. Well, I’ve got to get back—I’m supposed to be on duty.” He turned toward Jeeps. “Doing anything tonight?”

“*Anything!*” she said, invitingly.

“Oh, wait!” put in Miss Withers. “Mr. Belanger, what will they do with the luggage and clothes I left at the hotel? I wouldn’t dare show my face over there.”

He hesitated. “Your bill isn’t paid, is it? Well, then—according to the law, the police property custodian sends somebody to pack everything in the suitcases, seal ‘em, and hold the lot for six months. Then it’s auctioned off at a public sale, sight-unseen.”

“Oh, dear! And most of the stuff was rented!”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he promised her, and clattered down the stairs.

“Like him?” Miss Withers asked Jeeps.

“I don’t know. He certainly needs a lesson, he’s so sure of himself.”

“Hmm,” said the schoolteacher. “Now I understand why you resist so violently when I try to send you back to Bagley’s Mills, and why you’re talking about trying to get a job here in the city. You just want to give him a much-needed lesson.”

“Yes,” Jeeps admitted.

There was another ring at the doorbell. “Whoever it is, whatever it is, I’m taking a bath and cannot be disturbed!” announced Miss Withers, as she fled.

She was luxuriating in the tub again when there came a soft knock on the door of the bathroom. “Go away!” she cried.

But Jeeps poked in her head. “It’s a man from the kennel,” she said. “He wants to deliver a dog, and he also wants forty-six dollars.”

“Good heavens!” Miss Withers moaned. “It must be Ethel Brinker’s abandoned pet poodle. Whatever led me to say over the phone that I was her sister, and give my right address? Well, tell him to go off about his business.”

“But—”

“But me no buts,” ordered the schoolteacher. “Child, I’ve had about all I can stand for one day.” She climbed out of the tub and started to dry herself. Then to her utter consternation the bathroom door was rudely shoved open again and in romped a great gangling beast, barking ecstatically. It was apricot-brown in color, with a smooth shaved body and furred legs like a cowboy’s chaps, and its face beneath the tufted topknot was roguish, with a very red tongue showing through the slight beard and mustache. The hot brown eyes gleamed with merriment.

“Ee-e-k!” screeched the schoolteacher. “Take it away!”

The fantastically absurd creature seized the towel and went galumphing off with it, to be finally cornered by a giggling Jeeps on the living-room sofa. “Don’t blame *me*!” she told Miss Withers. “When I said you refused to pay the bill the man said the hell with it then, and—he just pushed the dog inside and slammed the door and ran down the stairs.”

“But—but is *that* enormous thing a poodle?” the schoolteacher demanded.

“Maybe it’s king-size. Look, there’s a tag on the collar. His name seems to be Talleyrand! Well, you’ve acquired a dog.”

“For only as long a time as it takes the SPCA truck to get here,” said Miss Withers firmly. Then she saw that Talleyrand was hopefully trying to shake hands with her, offering a delicate, clipped paw that would have fitted into a demi-tasse cup. “Don’t try to make it up with me,” she told the beast. “I’ve always wanted a Shetland pony, but not very much.”

*“Death will overtake you, although ye be in lofty towers.”*

—The Koran

HAVING HAD A NAP AND ANOTHER BATH, Miss Hildegarde Withers was feeling somewhat restored. Then suddenly the door burst open and back came Jeeps and the poodle, who had been taking each other for a walk. By the look of them neither had done much actual walking; they were out of breath and happy. "Had to stop at a pet store over on Broadway and invest in a leash," the girl confessed. "Even then he was a problem. He likes people."

"Really? Most dogs do, don't they?"

"But when he likes people he jumps up and licks their faces. He likes toys, too. Tried to go through a plate-glass window and retrieve a mechanical train that was going round and round. And he stole a rattle out of a baby's carriage."

"Oh, dear!"

"The man in the store said that Talleyrand is a Standard poodle—they come in three sizes and that is the biggest. He's nine or ten months old and somebody gave him what they call a Dutch bob instead of the old-fashioned poodle clip."

"All the same, I must have the SPCA truck come and take him away. I can't—"

But Talleyrand was resting his chin on Miss Withers's knee. "I shouldn't mind having a small dog around, but—"

Talleyrand unobtrusively slid both front paws into her lap. "And an apartment is no place for a dog anyway." The poodle was now curled up in her lap, his gangling length somehow folded into a warm, apricot-colored cushion of feathery fur. He yawned once, showing a complete set of incredibly magnificent fangs, and was asleep.

"Well!" said Miss Withers aghast. "He weighs a ton."

"Get down, you silly old thing!" Jeeps said. Talleyrand opened one eye, glanced at her coldly and stayed where he was.

"Down!" commanded Miss Withers, in her classroom voice. Reluctantly the poodle poured himself to the floor, where he turned around twice, dropped with his chin proprietorially resting on the toe of her Oxford, and immediately went to sleep again. "I was thinking," the schoolteacher

continued, "that after all this dog is our only link with Ethel Brinker. Perhaps he may come in handy—"

"You're weakening," Jeeps said happily. "You've changed your mind about calling the SPCA, just like you've changed it about sending me home and giving up the case."

"Of course I'm going on with it," Miss Withers said. "It was only in a weak moment that I pretended otherwise. We failed dismally in our first attempt to storm the Hotel Grandee. But Mount Everest wasn't climbed at the first try, you know."

The girl was smiling. "No. But I know a boy from Virginia who was in the Air Force, stationed at Karachi. One day when they didn't have to fly the Hump they went up over Everest in a B-17 and dropped tin cans with messages and a Confederate flag on a weighted stick."

"I suppose the members of the first successful expedition to reach the top were edified to learn that Kilroy had been there." Miss Withers sniffed. "But all the same, you've given me an idea. There are more ways to kill a cat than choking it to death with butter."

There were steps in the hall outside, and a ringing at the bell. "Maybe it's Tad," Jeeps whispered. "With more news!"

But she was wrong. Jerry Forrest stood hesitantly in the doorway. "I guess this is the right place; may I come in?"

"Of course," Miss Withers told him, noting that the public-relations expert was not in his usual effervescent mood. "Don't mind the dog, he won't bite." That was fairly obvious, as Talleyrand was jumping up and down on his hind legs, trying to lick the man's face. Jeeps had to banish the dog to the kitchen before they could get down to business.

"Mrs. Goggins, or whatever your name is," Forrest began hesitantly, "I just dropped over to talk about that little misunderstanding at the hotel last night."

"Misunderstanding? I'll have you know I was hustled out the back way in handcuffs!"

"Well—yes. But Brady was only doing what he thought was his duty. Look, I'll lay my cards on the table. You were in the wrong room, but no harm was done and if Peter Temple doesn't want to press charges the hotel certainly doesn't. Suppose we take an all-over view of the situation. Brady's job as chief of security for the hotel is to keep tabs on the guests, with the

help of his three flat-feet—or is it flatfoots?” Forrest laughed nervously, all by himself. “The hotel is sorry you had to spend the night in the pokey. I’ve got all your luggage and stuff downstairs in a taxi. Here’s your receipted hotel bill. If you’ll just sign a release saying that you won’t make any more trouble or bring suit against the Grandee or anything—”

“But I never intended—” began Miss Withers. Jeeps, behind their visitor’s back, was making incomprehensible signals at her.

“She means she never intended to make trouble for anybody,” the girl put in. “She was only trying to find a missing friend of hers, and I was helping her because that friend happens to be an aunt of mine.”

Forrest rubbed his pudgy nose. “Why you expected to find a missing friend in Temple’s rooms—Well, never mind. I talked him into seeing what swell publicity it would be for him if we put the whole thing down as just a moon-struck fan of his trying to collect souvenirs. Now if you’ll sign this paper prepared by the hotel’s lawyers—just a formality—we’ll forget the whole thing and part friends.” He whipped out his fountain pen and she signed her name—her real name. Forrest sighed with obvious relief. “Back in a jiffy.” He turned and went hastily down the stairs.

“Tad’s fine Italian hand,” said Jeeps importantly.

“What?”

“He must have hinted around the hotel office that you were going to bring suit for false arrest, so they sent their trouble-shooter to square things.” Jeeps blinked. “What are you going to do with the checkbook?”

“Pay the hotel bill, my child. I’m not going to be beholden to anybody. Beware of the Greeks when they come bearing gifts, or anything else.” Then Jerry Forrest and the taxi-driver came clumping up the stairs to pile the living-room high with the luggage which had been window-dressing for the short and inglorious career of the spurious Mrs. Goggins. Then he handed her the receipted hotel bill, which was for an amount that staggered her. But she finished filling in the check and gave it to him. “A lady never accepts any gifts from a man except candy and flowers,” she said when he looked surprised. “Would you care for some refreshment before you leave, Mr. Forrest?”

“No, thanks, too early in the day.” He mopped his face. “By the way, that’s a nice *caniche* you’ve got.”

“Oh, yes. Perhaps you’ve seen him before. I believe you knew his previous owner, Miss Ethel Brinker?”

Forrest shook his head. “The only Brinker I ever knew was the one in the book about the silver skates.”

“Or Alice Davidson? She too stayed at the hotel. Or Mae Carter—or Emma Sue Atkins?”

The pink, doughy face went blank—almost too blank, Miss Withers thought. But he shook his head again. “Sorry, I don’t get to meet many of the guests. Just the ones where there’s some publicity angle.”

“I understand. Your job is to get the hotel in the papers.”

“No, ma’am. A press agent nowadays is really mostly a hush-agent.”

Miss Withers looked surprised. “It’s like this,” he explained. “With a thousand or so guests, there’s bound to be incidents now and then in a big hotel. I try to see that the newspapers handle the story with restraint, so that it’s played down and if possible they leave out the name and just say ‘a midtown hotel.’”

“You mean, when such things happen as murder or suicide?”

“Well, yes. Only it’s an easier job at the Grandee than it is at some hotels, because of the way Mr. Brady watches the place. We haven’t had a murder since it opened, and only one suicide. That’s a record.”

Miss Withers frowned. “And that one suicide?”

“Just the old story. A woman from upstate somewhere went out of a tower window one night last summer. I didn’t have to do much hushing up, because it was the same day Babe Ruth passed on, and his obituaries crowded everything else out of the papers.”

“Harriet Bascom,” Jeeps put in suddenly.

Forrest looked innocently surprised. “Why, that was her name. But if you’re thinking there was anything off-color about her death, you’re off base. She just ran out of dough, got despondent, and took the easy way.”

Miss Withers’s sniff was eloquent. “I never understood why they call it ‘the easy way.’ It would seem to me that a person who does that is crowding a lifetime of misery into that terrible moment.”

“You may be right, at that,” Forrest agreed hastily. “Well, back to the grindstone.” He flashed an easy smile at the schoolteacher, let his eyes linger for a moment on Jeeps’s rather tight sweater, and hurried out.

“Now what?” said the girl. “There’s a funny look in your eye.”

“I’ve got a funny idea in my head,” Miss Withers admitted. “Perhaps we don’t have to climb the mountain.” She crossed to the telephone and dialed Spring 7-3100. There was some delay and then finally she heard the Inspector answer. “Oscar,” she cried. “Sit down and light a cigar, will you?”

“What the—I *am*!”

“Do you recall telling me some time ago that the police might show some action on this problem in which I’m interested if only you had a corpse to work on? Well—” She held the receiver well away from her ear until it had stopped cracking. “Perhaps I *did* say that never again would I meddle in what doesn’t concern me, but this happens to concern me very much! A lady can change her mind, can’t she?” Miss Withers told him about the phone call to La Porte. “This body that I’m speaking of—I imagine it’s been buried for some time. But perhaps there was an autopsy performed. Do you remember Harriet Bascom, the woman who committed suicide—officially—at the Grandee last summer?”

“Of course I do. There was a routine PM. Not that we needed one, when she’d splashed herself all over the sidewalk.”

“Spare the gruesome details, please.”

“Nothing to it,” he told her. “For your information, I went through the entire file a day or so ago, and there wasn’t a hole in it—to speak of.”

“What about the holes *not* to speak of?”

He sighed. “I’m glad I never had to go to school to you. It was just the business about the window the woman jumped out of, but obviously the doorman made a mistake. Look, Hildegarde, haven’t you made trouble enough already?”

“Sorry, but I can’t help it. My stern New England conscience—”

He yelped. “You were born in *Iowa*!”

“Well, I have one all the same! Oscar, I want to see that Bascom file.”

Again his voice made the telephone buzz. “Sweet spirits of niter! You can’t come barging down here to paw through our official records. Not today especially—in a few minutes the assistant-commissioner is going to drop in and bring along the son-of-a—the officer he wants to put in my place. I haven’t time—”

Very reasonably Miss Withers pointed out that there wasn’t anything to prevent him from dropping in on his way home from work. “Perhaps Jeeps

and I will even let you stay for dinner; there's a nice three-pound T-bone in the refrigerator."

"Hmmm," said Piper. "Don't think you can get around me with bribes. But I will drop by and give you the background on the Bascom case, just to prove to you once and for all that when we say a case is closed, it's closed." He hung up abruptly.

"That man!" said Miss Withers. "Sometimes I'd like to wring his neck."

"Sometimes any woman wants to wring any man's neck," Jeeps told her. "Well, I know how to make French-fries." She started briskly into the kitchen, then stopped in the doorway, gasping. The schoolteacher was beside her in a moment, and they both stared blankly at what would have been a most unusual camera study. The door of the refrigerator was wide open, and most of its contents had been neatly removed and laid out on the linoleum. Talleyrand lay curled on the closed porcelain top of the stove, his full round belly warmed by the comfortable glow of the pilot-light inside, snoring gently. A wisp of brown butcher's paper sticking to his apricot whiskers was all that remained of the T-Bone.

After dinner was over and the dishes piled in the sink that night a relative calm settled itself on the apartment. For a time Jeeps had lent her decorative presence, hovering with elaborate nonchalance around the telephone until it finally rang; then she rushed off in a dither to meet her young man.

Talleyrand had for a while amused himself by leaping after the fat blue smoke rings which the Inspector obligingly sent spinning across the living-room, but finally the dog caught one, sneezed reproachfully, and lost all interest. Now he was stretched out upside down on the sofa, head on a silk pillow, lost in doggish dreams.

"Far be it from me," said Piper, "to question anything that goes on in this household. But you're not actually thinking of keeping the dog, are you?"

Perhaps she hadn't decided, really, until that moment. But woman-like, she said, "And pray why not? He's probably quite valuable. Besides, he's sort of a psychic link with Ethel Brinker. He may be useful somehow."

The Inspector was amused. "Useful as a pocket in a nightshirt," he told her. "A dog is only a dog. You don't actually think that just because this

fool pup here once belonged for a few weeks to the Brinker woman he's going to have a flash of extra-sensory perception or something and recognize her murderer if he runs into him on the street? Not that I'm admitting she was murdered."

"Never mind Ethel Brinker for now. I lured you here to talk about the Bascom case."

"Okay." Piper tapped his cigar in the general direction of the saucer with which she had pointedly provided him. "But you've got to understand that it was suicide and nothing more. After years of experience with such things a police officer can spot right away whether somebody has taken his own life or not, just like—well, like a school-marm can tell whether an examination paper is cribbed. Of course there are a few borderline cases which could be one thing or the other—there are always a few killers who try to make it look like suicide, and now and then a suicide who wants to make it look like murder or accident. But they don't get away with it."

"Or at least if they do, the police don't know about it."

"Anyway, the Harriet Bascom case wasn't in that category. Every detail fits—"

"Except one. On the phone you mentioned the window she jumped from?"

"Oh, that!" He waved his hand. "You'll be disappointed. But I better go back to the beginning. The body came hurtling down out of nowhere and struck the sidewalk not a dozen feet from the front entrance of the Grandee, where the doorman was on duty. You probably saw him when you were at the hotel—a big, solid specimen who used to play pro football, name of Hoppy Muller. It was just about twilight—"

"Twilight came early for Harriet Bascom, didn't it?"

"About seven-thirty at night," the Inspector said literally. "The call came to us at seven thirty-eight, and the radio car was cruising only a block or so away. The officers got there and found the body of a very well-dressed woman of around forty, who'd just been touched up at the beauty parlor—"

"She didn't have any last words?"

He smiled patiently. "When you dive from the thirty-eighth floor the sidewalk has the last word. Dead on arrival. One man took charge of the body and the other went into the hotel and finally managed to find out who she was. After checking at the desk, one of the umpteen assistant-managers

took him upstairs and unlocked Miss Bascom's suite for him. The window was wide open, and an automatic phonograph was playing *Stormy Weather* full blast. The sergeant said it gave him the willies to come into that room and hear the record moaning about '*Can't go on, everything I have is gone.*' There was a smashed cocktail glass on the floor. Plenty of new clothes and expensive trinkets in the place but no money—not a buck, not a thin dime in her handbag. She must have used up her last traveler's-check that day, because the empty folder was in the wastebasket."

"But what about the window?"

"Oh, yes. Well, the doorman, Muller, claimed that right after her body hit the sidewalk he ran out into the street and looked up toward the tower to see where she'd jumped from—and not a single window was open anywhere!"

"But on a warm August night, Oscar—"

"The entire hotel is air-conditioned, and guests are warned not to open the windows, only of course they can if they want to. Anyway, at that hour a man in the street might very well not be able to see whether a single window that high up was open or not. Especially since the fellow was probably unstrung, having a body miss him that close."

Miss Withers felt somehow that it would take a good deal to unstring a professional football player, even a retired one. "But, Oscar," she said thoughtfully, "you insist that everything in the whole affair points to suicide. Yet there wasn't a farewell note, or you'd have mentioned it."

Piper sighed again. "My dear woman, we find notes in only fifty-four percent of known suicides. People who kill themselves only leave word behind when they want to comfort or accuse somebody close to them, and Harriet Bascom had nobody—"

"Aha! She was just another woman who was lonely and middle-aged and unattached!" The schoolteacher was politely triumphant. "Just like the four others!"

"Relax, Hildegarde! Even the hotel maid said that Miss Bascom was crying and hysterical that noon when she came in to make up the rooms. The bellboy who brought up the farewell cocktail she drank—"

"Which showed in the autopsy?"

"It certainly did. Slight amount of alcohol in the stomach, and traces in the brain. Anyway, the boy said she seemed keyed-up and strange, and that

she surprised him with a five-dollar tip—her last five, I guess. All that is completely typical of the suicide who wants to end everything with a gesture, even to her smashing the cocktail glass after a last toast to here goes nothing. Her prints were on the glass and shaker, and nobody else's in the place except for the maid and housekeeper."

"And the bellboy's, on the tray?"

"Sure, sure. So please, I ask you. Don't go trying to make a mystery out of Harriet Bascom's death. The woman was obviously at the end of her rope. She had come down to the city to have a little fun, but tomorrow morning she'd have to face a big hotel bill that she couldn't pay. The party was over."

Miss Withers slowly nodded. "Who claimed her body?"

"Nobody. She lay in Bellevue morgue for a while, and finally went to Potter's Field or the modern equivalent. The hotel people held a claim against her baggage for their bill, as they have a legal right to do. Anyway, it all boils down to the case of a woman who inherited a little money, blew it in the big city, and then decided she'd rather die than go back home to Poughkeepsie. Maybe she had something there at that."

"Perhaps." Miss Withers poured out more coffee for them both, her long upper lip pursed tightly.

"Still not convinced? The police have to be wrong, because you've got a hunch?"

"To be a successful detective, Oscar, one has to have something more than a knack of observation and deduction. One needs to be able sometimes to come to the right answer without going through all the laborsome preliminaries. Call it intuition or extra-sensory perception if you will—"

"But two and two still make four!"

"Two and two what? If you mean numerals they can just as well make twenty-two or zero, depending on how they're arranged. And two apples and two notes on a bugle don't make four of anything."

"Metaphysics, yet!"

"And in spite of everything," she concluded firmly, "I still think that Harriet Bascom was murdered, along with the others."

Piper looked at her. "Those four women are beginning to haunt you, Hildegarde."

"Exactly! Their poor ghosts are always with me, these days."

“Along with a pretty bobby-soxer and a big silly French poodle! Must get pretty crowded in a small apartment.”

“Oscar, this isn’t funny. I tell you, somewhere behind the disappearance of these women there’s an evil intelligence at work, a human spider who preys on a certain type of lonely, susceptible woman with a little money. Not content with the cash, he takes their lives, too. It doesn’t seem like mass murder to him, because he’s really only killing the same woman over and over again, like Jack the Ripper.”

“This psychological stuff! So you’re looking for a homicidal maniac?”

“Only in the sense that all murderers are a little insane. He is a realist, rather. The money is his main interest, and after he’s got it he wants to make sure the victims keep silent, so he puts them quietly away. Harriet Bascom was his first try, and something went wrong. But he learned by his mistake, and knocked the others off one-two-three-four, like sitting ducks. He’s a tiger with a taste for blood.”

“Tigers and ducks! It was a spider a minute ago—”

“You know what I mean. Oscar, can’t you see that Indian summer is the most dangerous time for a woman? This man has managed somehow to represent to a certain type of woman all the things she has missed in life. I can almost visualize him. He’s tall and masculine and well-groomed, a little past middle age but not soft or fat. He’s a composite of all the matinee idols of yesterday, the men they dreamed of but never met. He dresses beautifully, and has a way of looking at a woman that makes her feel like a girl again.”

“You sound,” said the Inspector, “like something out of the confession magazines.”

She sighed. “Always the Philistine, aren’t you?”

“Maybe. But what does it add up to? You’ve been sleuthing around for weeks, and all you’ve got are a lot of little bits of things that don’t go together and never will.”

“Then you never saw anyone make a patchwork quilt,” Miss Withers told him. “They accumulate hundreds of scraps—all materials, all shapes, all colors. And then it’s sewn together, blending into a harmony, a pattern.”

“Uh-huh,” he yawned. “This Philistine is ready for a little shut-eye.”

“Sometimes,” she told him, “I don’t think your eyes are really open. Oscar, what will happen to Harriet Bascom’s things?”

He looked at her curiously as he struggled into his overcoat. "Auctioned off after they've been held six months. Anyone who's interested can call the police property clerk and find out. Why, do you think you can find some clue our men overlooked?" He grinned. "Oh, I get it. You want to acquire something that was hers, just as you've got hold of the Brinker woman's dog and Miss Davidson's favorite niece. What is this, voodoo or mumbo-jumbo?"

"Not quite," said Miss Withers softly. "Of course, there is among primitive people a widely held belief that there is a sort of psychic aura that attaches itself to a person's possessions. And some soothsayers can tell fortunes at a distance if they are given a trinket that belonged to the person."

He looked worried. "You actually believe that?"

"I can believe a great many impossible things before breakfast."

At that moment Talleyrand, awakening with a start, realized that someone was going outside. He proceeded to make it clear that he intended to attach himself to the expedition. "No," said Miss Withers firmly. "Go away. Go back to sleep." But the dog cocked his head, blinked, and then suddenly rushed to the hall closet. Opening the door with some difficulty and a grating sound of teeth on metal knob, he plunged in and then came bounding joyously out with his new leather leash in his jaws, offering it first to one and then the other. Finally he laid it down on the schoolteacher's feet, whining hopefully.

"Oh, perhaps on second thought," she said, "I'll walk as far as the subway—it's such a fine night."

At any rate it was a fine night for Jeeps Davidson, otherwise known as the wrong Alice. The schoolteacher returned to the apartment half an hour later, feeling rather like the ground crew of a captive balloon, and found the young couple occupying her sofa, their heads close together. There were potato chips and empty coke bottles in front of them, and the radio was blaring forth a rich and dissonant polyphony which she took to be jazz or whatever they called it nowadays.

Jeeps looked so bubbly, so glassy-eyed and ecstatic that Miss Withers wondered if she should try to smell her breath. But the girl had not been looking at the world through cocktail-colored glasses. "Tad here has something to say to you," she cried.

The schoolteacher backed away. "Heavens, child! I don't stand to *that* degree *in loco parentis*. If he wants to ask for your hand he should talk to your father."

There was a sudden, brittle silence. Jeeps said quickly, "He wants to speak to you about Harriet Bascom."

"It's only that I guess I was the last person to see her alive," Tad said very gravely. "You see, in this kind of job-training I have to take my turn at everything, and it happened that the night she died I was on room service and had to take the cocktails up to her suite."

"You? Good heavens, why didn't you say so before?"

"Who asked me? I didn't even know until tonight that you were interested in her."

"Very well." Miss Withers frowned. "Did I understand you to say just now that you took up cocktails, plural?"

"Yes, a shaker of daiquiris, but only one glass. I figured her date must be on the wagon."

"Her date?"

"Sure. She was good-looking, I mean for an old girl like her, but that night she really was loaded for bear. Had on a red dress without any shoulders, and everything. Naturally I figured she had a date."

"A date with death," said Miss Withers slowly. "An appointment in Samarra. But did you notice anything else, anything at all, that might help us?"

Tad Belanger frowned. "Only that she was wound up tight, as if she was full of benzedrine or something. She didn't say much, though. Just thanked me, and handed me five dollars."

"An unusual tip, even for the Grandee?"

"You said a mouthful and I don't mean teeth. It was a big tip, especially from a woman. Sometimes when there's a convention in town or something a man will get a little happy and throw money around. It doesn't make much difference to us trainees one way or the other—we have to turn over most of it to the bell-captain. He bears down hard on us G.I.'s, because we're bucking for promotion and he's got where he's going. It's like officer candidates under a tough first sergeant."

"I see. And was the tip in dollar bills and small change?"

Tad shook his head. "No change. Just a fin—I mean a five-dollar bill."

“Oh,” said Miss Withers. “That’s different.” She chatted with them for a few minutes and then excused herself. “I need my beauty sleep,” she said. “Turn the radio back on if you like—nothing can disturb me after last night.”

Ten minutes later she suddenly popped up in the bedroom doorway, a brush in her hand and her hair, still a little vari-colored, over her shoulders. “Please excuse me,” she said. “But I just thought of something important. Jeeps, would you mind very much if I made a date with your young man for some night soon?”

The girl said, “Huh?” and Tad’s mouth fell abjectly open.

“Perhaps tomorrow night?”

“Why, I guess so,” the girl managed. “I mean, why should I mind?”

“If it’s a clear day, of course,” continued Miss Withers. “For the most propitious time I’ll have to consult the almanac. It should be here in this bookcase—”

Jeeps came toward her, almost warily. “I don’t get it.”

“Oh? It’s really very simple, child. But don’t worry, I’m not trying to steal your beau. My Mrs. Goggins days are over. You may even come along on the date if you like, and I thought we might ask Inspector Piper too.”

“But what’s the almanac got to do with it?”

“For this particular date,” Miss Withers said absently, “the stars must be in the right conjunction or whatever they call it. Ah, here we are!” She studied the page for a moment and then turned to smile at them brightly.

“Shall we say tomorrow at five-thirty, if it doesn’t rain or snow or anything?”

“Not a picnic!” Tad cried. “In the winter time?”

“A sort of picnic,” the schoolteacher admitted. “But no sandwiches, no hard-boiled eggs, and no ants.”

*“The waking have one and the same world, the sleeping turn each aside into a world of his own.”*

—Heraclitus

HE SAT LIKE A MAN BORN TO THE SADDLE, though under him the spirited bay mare now and then danced skittishly, impatient at being kept down to a walk on so fine a summer morning. Though it was only June, the corn was almost waist-high and already beginning to tassel, due partly perhaps to the new hybrid seed but more as a result of the fertilizer he had blended from the farm's organic waste, straw and leaves and a few chemicals, in the great concrete-enclosed compost heaps behind the dairy barns. Along the slope of the hill strips of dark blue-green alfalfa and legumes contrasted with yellow oats, lying in contoured curves so that even after yesterday's heavy rain there was no sign of gullying.

He chirped to the mare and they trotted on almost to the whitewashed rail fence. Beyond browsed the vast herd of his cattle, milking-Shorthorns crossed with the sacred Brahma cattle of India to produce mammoth beefs that were almost all rib roast and tenderloin. Each of his full-uddered cows had a plump calf or two tagging at her heels. Farther on, all scattered over the lush grass like bits of black wool, were his thousand Karakul sheep, and a little to the right were the red Berkshire swine, each sow surrounded by a litter as fat and smiling as piggy banks in a store window.

Turning back home again at the touch of a rein against her dark sweating neck, the mare cantered easily and then suddenly reared as a cottontail burst from a clump of weeds almost under her forefeet. She took the bit in her teeth and bolted. He tried to pull her in, and then felt a bridle-strap snap. At a headlong gallop they swept back along the cornfield, then down the farm lane. He realized with a flicker of panic that the hired man who had neglected to mend the bridle had remembered to close the five-barred gate leading into the barnyard. Too late to check or turn, the big bay gathered herself for the jump, but at the moment of take-off her foot slipped in a hog-wallow full of rainwater. There was a sickening crash, and then he found himself flying through the air, straight toward the redolent, steaming mass of the compost heap.

Max F. Brady landed sprawled across the top of his office desk, fingers clutching at toppling piles of seed catalogues and farm manuals. His swivel

chair had bucked out from beneath him, and his face was resting almost in the overflowing ash tray.

Someone was hammering heavily on his door. Still a little dazed from his nap, Brady dusted himself off, set up the chair again, and then pressed the release button and called, "Come in!"

His visitor was a field marshal in the Imperial Army of the Czars—up as far as the collar. Above that was the battered, incongruous face of Hoppy Muller, the doorman. "Excuse me, Mr. Brady. But they said you wanted to be told."

"Told what?"

"If she showed her face around here again. I mean that Mrs. Goggins or whatever her real name is."

"Oh, *no!*" muttered the chief of security. He came suddenly wide awake, and rushed out of the door. A moment later he went jaywalking straight across the late afternoon traffic of the Avenue, to come up beside an illegally parked taxicab from which two women and a driver were gaping up at the sky. "Just what's going on here?" Brady demanded.

"We're only window-shopping, officer," said Miss Hildegarde Withers placatingly. Then she recognized him. "Oh?"

"I know you," Brady said coldly. "In spite of the low-comedy disguise."

"Disguise?" She looked blank. She was wearing her own face and hair, plus a plaid raglan coat that had stood her in good stead for five years and was equal to five more. And her second-best hat, too—the one the Inspector always said looked like an abandoned bird's-nest. "Really, Mr. Brady!"

"I want it strictly understood—" he began.

"Hush! Look, Jeeps!" Miss Withers was excitedly pointing up toward the Grandee tower, a great looming shadow against the sunset winter sky.

"Yes, I can see it too!" the girl sang out.

Up on the thirty-eighth floor of the hotel a window stood unmistakably open, a tiny vacant oblong as apparent as a missing tooth in a smiling mouth. "Of course!" There was firm triumph in Miss Withers's voice.

"I demand to know," Brady said, "why you're still hanging around here? If you think you're going to make any more trouble for Mr. Temple  
—"

“Only an experiment,” the schoolteacher explained. “You see, it’s the same time of day, at least in relation to the setting of the sun, as it was August sixteenth, when Harriet Bascom died. I do wish the Inspector had accepted our invitation to come along. But this might convince him.”

She was tilting a miniature camera up into the air. “I never can remember if it should be one-ninth of a second at f:50 or the other way around.” The shutter clicked.

“Wait a minute! Just what are you up to?” Brady was almost burbling. “Are you trying to dig up that old suicide and hint that there was something *wrong* with it?”

“Hinting? I’m saying it right out loud.”

“The police made a full investigation, and said it was suicide. So did the deputy medical examiner. I myself said so—and I’ve been a cop all my life. Muller was mistaken, that’s all, about the window.”

Miss Withers sniffed resoundingly.

“Look, lady, I don’t see that it’s any of your business. But it so happens that there’s a small ornamental ledge outside the hotel windows. She could have perched there and pulled the window shut behind her before she let go. A person who is screwy enough to kill theirself is screwy enough to do anything.”

“*Herself*,” corrected the schoolteacher automatically. “Then I suppose her ghost came back and opened the window later, the way it was found by the police?”

“Look, ma’am. If you don’t get away from this hotel and stay away, I’m going to have you put under a peace-bond for malicious mischief!”

“Make a note of that, Miss Davidson,” cried Miss Withers brightly. “Driver, you too are a witness. The hotel authorities first tried to bribe me by offering to cancel my bill, and then when that failed they resorted to threats!”

Now Brady’s face was lobster-red. He leaned closer into the open window of the taxicab.

“Godalmighty!” he roared. “I don’t give a damn in hell—”

He had recently been eating onions, and Miss Withers sank back into the seat, trying at the same time to hold a handkerchief to her nose and both hands over her ears. Her withdrawal gave Talleyrand the opening he was looking for. A whiskered brown avalanche erupted suddenly from the floor

of the taxi, plunging with reckless abandon half out of the window toward Brady's face, an attack all the more startling because it took place in absolute silence, without any warning. The man threw himself instinctively backward, one arm held up to protect his throat, and an oncoming station wagon had to swerve sharply to avoid hitting him.

"Talley!" gasped the startled schoolteacher, as with the girl's help she managed to haul the dog back inside the taxi again. "Shame on you, you bad dog!"

But it was Mr. Brady who looked ashamed, or at least considerably abashed. He stood there, pale and shaken. "That dog—" he started to say. Then: "But I guess I asked for it, didn't I? Talking out of turn. Sorry." He started to lift his hat, found that he wasn't wearing one, then bowed stiffly and went back toward the hotel.

"Well, I never!" said Miss Withers.

Jeeps looked at the poodle with a new respect. "Our hero!" she cooed. "Him wasn't going to let the nasty mans shake his fist and swear at us, was him? I guess maybe this better be the last time I tie a ribbon in *your* topknot, no matter how cute and French it looks." She firmly removed the bit of jade-green silk and dropped it out of the car window as they started toward home.

"Perhaps," Miss Withers told her gently, "you didn't notice that Talley was wagging his tail all the time. Before you award him any medals for valor, you ought to know that the silly animal was only trying to lick Brady's face."

Yet it had been on the whole a minor triumph all around, and the schoolteacher felt pleased and encouraged. Her hunch about Harriet Bascom was rapidly solidifying into a certainty.

"Do you suppose," Jeeps spoke up suddenly later that evening, from where she sprawled on the floor in front of the fireplace, "that Mr. Brady could recognize Tad standing up there in that open window?"

Miss Withers looked up from the black leather notebook with its grim dossiers on the four missing women. She was engaged in filling in a separate page for Harriet Bascom—although of course Harriet was missing in a different way. "I doubt it," she said firmly.

“But he’ll know that somebody in the hotel got a passkey and opened a window for us, by arrangement,” the girl went on stubbornly. “If Brady finds out that it was Tad, he’ll have him fired.”

“Child, they wouldn’t discharge anybody for that.” Or would they? Miss Withers bit her pencil. “I hope not, anyway. But it had to be done. You can’t make an omelet without breaking an egg.”

“Yes,” said Jeeps with a feeble smile. “But *you* always break them over somebody’s head.”

“What? Oh, you’re implying that I failed to handle Mr. Brady with kid gloves?”

The girl nodded.

“Perhaps you’re right. But I don’t like to be dragged around in handcuffs and put in jail overnight. Nor do I like to be yelled at by policemen, even retired ones.”

“You made an enemy of him, though. He could have been a valuable ally.”

“Stuff and nonsense, girl. Do you suppose that a self-satisfied egotist like Brady is going to admit even to himself that right under his infallible nose a slick confidence man has been preying on women? The man’s as stubborn and opinionated as the Inspector. And speaking of *him*—”

She picked up the phone and called Piper’s home, but there was no answer. “Out again,” she said. “That man keeps the hours of a tomcat.” Just on a chance she dialed Spring 7-3100. “Let me speak to Inspector Oscar Piper, please.”

“You mean *Acting Chief-Inspector Piper*,” came the gruff voice of the uniformed man at Headquarters switchboard. “You can reach him at his office in the Municipal Building. The extension is—”

“Never mind,” Miss Withers murmured, and hung up the phone. So it had happened, then! This was certainly no propitious moment to discuss anything with Oscar, not until he had had time to cool down a little.

During the next few days she tried to telephone him at his new office several times, only to be told by a glib female secretary that Acting Chief-Inspector Piper was out, or in conference, or on the long-distance phone. “Was there any message?”

There was, but she preferred to give it to him in person.

She also began to note a faint but definite dissension in the ranks. Jeeps Davidson, still looking worried and a little reproachful, had started job-hunting, announcing that the money she had saved to repay her loan to Aunt Alice was running low and that she didn't intend to be a burden on anybody.

Miss Withers also found herself continually reminded of the limitations which went with being a retired teacher on a minute pension. Not for her was the unlimited expense account of the private detective, or the vast resources of the police machine. Her junket at the Grandee had run into a great deal more money than she had planned, even though the chinchilla coat and most of the other props had only been rented for the occasion. Sleuthing, she felt, was difficult at best—without having to count the pennies every time you wanted to jump into a taxicab.

With very few chips, she was trying to play a lone hand. "I seem to have got myself in wrong with everybody!" she murmured sadly. Then Talleyrand, sensing her mood, slid off the sofa and came over to put a sympathetic chin on her knee, gazing up with warmly adoring eyes. "Everybody but you," she told him. "You silly beast, why can't you talk?" For he could, she thought, tell her everything that she wanted to know.

But Talleyrand only told her in unmistakable sign language that it was time to go for another walk.

Later that night the schoolteacher sat alone at her desk for a long time, reading over and over again the all-too-skimpy biographies of the four—no, five—women who had been victims of Mr. Nemo. The deadly parallels were still there, but they seemed to lead nowhere but into a dead-end street—or down the garden path. She frowned and racked her brains and waited hopefully for a flash of inspiration, but it did not come. The bits of cloth which she had been so laboriously collecting refused to fit themselves into a pattern.

After all, what did she actually know about the man she called Mr. Nemo? He had made a long-distance call to La Porte checking up on the real Mrs. Goggins, and had thrifitly hung up when they got her on the wire. And he had closed a hotel window, and after a little while had opened it again. Why?

She even washed her hair that night at bedtime, the last resort of the lonely or frustrated woman anywhere, but even that was to no avail. Much

later she half-awoke to hear Jeeps come tiptoeing in, and there were sounds of the refrigerator door being opened as the girl and dog shared a late snack. There went the liverwurst that was supposed to be tomorrow's lunch. The schoolteacher turned over and drifted off to sleep again. It was, luckily, not often that she dreamed—or at least remembered her dreams on waking. But this one was a dilly.

She was walking forlornly along a sandy shore in a thick sea-fog, past great black jagged rocks that rose above her head. Some birds were crying and mewling in the sky, and tired waves lapped almost at her ankles. She was aware of a hullabaloo of voices in the distance, crying wordless, terrible things. There was the baying of hounds, coming closer.

She began to run, but the sand was soft and heavy and her limbs were drained of strength. Looking back over her shoulder she saw through the breaking fog a wild advancing mob of men armed with guns and pitchforks and scythes, some carrying torches. Chased by the armed rabble, and by a pack of great hairy slavering hounds as black and terrible as that infamous beast of the Baskervilles, came poor Talleyrand, with a bedraggled ribbon tied in his topknot and a tin can rattling behind his stub of a tail.

“Mad dog! Mad dog!” rang the terrible cry. More terrible still was the baying of the great wolf-dogs. Guns blasted, and a bullet went screaming overhead.

The poodle came leaping blindly toward her and then scrambled up into her arms as the hell-hounds, their jaws foaming, eyes glowing like flames, ringed her round. Talley squirmed in her arms, whining desperately.

There was something she could do, something she could say. But like Ali Baba at the cave entrance, she had forgotten the words. The poodle whined again. “This—this is only a dream!” she managed to moan, and woke at once to see that it was morning and she was in her own bed where she belonged. But somehow in the night the poodle had managed to solve the problem of the locks and guards they placed on the kitchen door, and he was now curled up across her feet. He shivered a little in his sleep, and whined softly.

“Oh, dear!” cried Miss Withers, with the pixilated logic of the half-asleep. “I've saved myself and left poor Talley back in the dream! Here, fellow—wake up!”

The poodle blinked, raised his head, and then slid sheepishly off the bed and trotted back to the kitchen. "It was probably just that he was dreaming about rabbits," Jeeps suggested cheerily at the breakfast table, as she sneaked the dog a bit of hot muffin. Which was close, but not the exact truth. Talleyrand had been city-born and raised, and had no knowledge of rabbits. When his mistress interrupted his dream he had been joyfully chasing after a toy electric train.

*Anyway, so much for dreams!* thought Miss Withers sensibly. They were only fantasies, tricks played on you by your subconscious during the second or two it took to wake up. Talley had whined in his sleep, and that had set her off. Her fertile imagination had borrowed from Conan Doyle, from that terrible last chapter of David Garnett's *Lady into Fox*, and from memories of Laguna Beach in winter. As dreams went it was strictly a B-budget quickie.

The morning was bright, with the eaves already dripping. And Jeeps Davidson was humming to herself, and for once putting away something more than her usual "Mexican breakfast" of black coffee and a cigarette. "You seem a different girl this morning," Miss Withers observed.

"Do I? Same old face, same hairdo. Same dress—dammit."

"Same boy-friend? I gather that your fears of his being fired were unfounded?"

The girl smiled proudly. "Dreamboat is to be fifteenth assistant-manager starting the first of the month."

"I'm delighted to hear it!"

"And that's not all. I think he's found me a job. You see, he happens to know a girl who runs a nursery school—"

"You mean, he *used* to know her," corrected Miss Withers wickedly.

"That's right, he used to know a girl who runs a nursery school up on University Heights, and she needs an assistant in the mornings. It's just wholesale baby-sitting, only I don't guess you sit much. Anyway, maybe when payday comes, I'll be able to chip in my share of the rent and groceries."

"Oh," said Miss Withers. "Not that you aren't welcome as the flowers in May. But I was afraid that if you got a job you'd want a place of your own."

Jeeps said that wild horses couldn't drag her away, that she was staying until the last-act curtain—which would be curtains for Mr. Nemo—and that besides, her mother would never hear of her being in New York on her own. "Besides, you mustn't be alone here, because you're the one and only person the murderer has to fear. He might decide to eliminate you, and come sneaking in here some night—"

"There's Talley to protect me."

"He's the kind of dog who'd hold the flashlight for the burglars and show them through the house!"

Which was quite true. Still, Miss Withers had her own opinion of how useful in a free-for-all like that would be this ninety-eight pounds of teenage girlhood. "I suppose you could help scream," she admitted.

"I can do *lots*," Jeeps said firmly. "I haven't been wasting my time. Even with Tad—" She cocked her head thoughtfully. "Do you know, sometimes I get the feeling that my swing-swain hasn't told us everything he knows. Oh, I don't mean he's actually holding out purposely. But there's something he knows, only he doesn't *know* that he knows it." The girl looked at her watch, and shrieked. "'By—I gotta rush out and prove that I can teach kids how to string colored beads. Wish me luck.'" And she was gone.

Slowly and thoughtfully Miss Withers did up the breakfast dishes, trying not to be annoyed at the cigarette ashes in Jeeps's cup which ruined the suds and made it necessary to draw another sinkful of hot water.

"Youth!" she observed philosophically.

Shortly before eleven o'clock the telephone rang, and the schoolteacher rushed to answer it. It was about time the Inspector returned her call, she felt.

But it was only Jeeps, reporting that she had the job and wouldn't be home until later.

The morning's mail was equally disappointing, consisting only of a plaintive bill from the Elysian Fields Doghaven to the amount of forty-six dollars board bill, addressed to Miss Ethel Brinker care Miss H. Withers.

When Jeeps Davidson came bouncing back to the apartment early that afternoon she found Miss Withers down on the floor with a box of dog-candy and a thick book from the library on French poodles, trying to lure Talleyrand into learning some parlor tricks. "But I don't know who is

teaching whom," the schoolteacher admitted. "He's 'way ahead of me at this sort of thing."

Jeeps seemed a little subdued, for a girl who has just landed a job. "Does it tell anywhere in the book how to train him to be a watchdog?" she asked.

"It does. I mean it tells why you can't. For generations the poodle has been the circus and carnival performing dog of Europe. They bred them for brains, just as other dogs have been bred for looks or fighting ability or keenness of scent. But somewhere along the line they bred the fierceness out of them, and you can't put it back. It says here that with his high I.Q. the Standard poodle should have been perfect material for the Army K-9 corps during the war, but that it was practically impossible to savage them up so that they would attack a human being. That's taboo with them. They just get embarrassed."

Poodles also get bored, as Talleyrand immediately demonstrated by yawning rudely in their faces and then withdrawing from school. He trotted out into the kitchen, stood balancing on his hind legs until he was sure that the porcelain top was closed over the gas stove, and then leaped to his favorite perch as gracefully as any cat. Turning around a couple of times—due, the book said, to an atavistic desire to frighten away any snakes which might be lurking in the tall grass—he dropped down into a furry, apricot-colored bundle and was immediately asleep.

"The reason I asked about watchdogs," Jeeps confessed to Miss Withers, "was that on the way home I got to thinking. If we're right about Mr. Nemo he's already done away with five women. He was too cautious to make a pass at Mrs. Goggins—but as soon as he finds out that Miss Withers is still on his trail—"

"If he came around here we could always scream," the schoolteacher suggested.

"The others didn't!" Jeeps was very serious. "How about a pistol? I can shoot."

"My child, there happens to be a law called the Sullivan Act, here in New York, which restricts the use of firearms to the underworld. I doubt very much whether the Inspector would recommend my getting a pistol permit." She brightened. "But it is an excuse to call him up, all the same!"

This time she found the long-suffering Inspector, by some miracle, in his office. But he seemed cold and aloof and not at all interested in pistol permits, or in windows on the thirty-eighth floor of the Grandee, open or shut. "You might take the matter up with Captain Gruber," he told her. "He runs Homicide now, you know."

"Oscar, don't be like that. I've called you up several times—"

"To congratulate me on my so-called promotion?"

"No, to say I was sorry."

"Well," the Inspector told her, only slightly mollified, "you can't be any sorrier than I am."

There was a lull. "Oscar, what does your new secretary look like?"

"Lovely as the dawn," he said wickedly. "With eyes as blue as the lakes of Killarney. She has pretty shell-pink ears, one of which is probably glued to the extension at the moment." There was a soft click on the line.

"Well!" said Miss Withers. "By the way, Oscar. You must come up for dinner one night soon."

"Nix," he said firmly. "Last time you promised me steak and I got hash."

"He hung up on me!" said the schoolteacher. "Just for that I won't let him take me to the auction tomorrow!"

*“A straight line is the shortest distance between two points.”*

—Euclid

## 9

BY EIGHT-THIRTY A. M. THE BIG square room on the second floor of the Ninth Avenue Auction and Storage Company was well filled, though most of the people looked as if they had come in just to get warm. There were a few wise-looking, beady-eyed old men who appeared to be pawnshop proprietors or second-hand dealers, a sprinkling of youths in leather jackets with the aimless look of the unemployed about them, and numerous housewives with shopping-bags and the hopeful expression of waiting for the bingo game to commence. A dozen or so rows of folding chairs had been set up facing the platform, but most of the crowd were moving about, filtering in and out of the smaller storeroom where behind a wire barrier were stacked the various articles to be sold. The luggage which had belonged to Harriet Bascom, though piled in helter-skelter with the rest, stood out like a rose among thorns. Besides, each of the six shiny pieces bore the neat initials *H.B.* in gold. They were tagged *Lot 568*.

Miss Withers seized upon a uniformed patrolman who stood by the door and demanded to know when the luggage would be opened for inspection. "It won't," he said wearily. "The whole idea of the auction, ma'am, is that it's sight-unseen. That's the law. Anyone skips a hotel and leaves baggage or personal property, it gets sealed and turned over to the auction company as is, to be held six months and then sold."

"Then the suitcases might be empty—or filled with articles of value?"

"Sure, sure." His voice echoed with deep professional disillusionment. "Once in a while you hear about somebody making a haul. Last month a lady here bid five dollars and got a sample case filled with eight hundred shoes."

"My, she was lucky!"

"All she has to do now is marry a one-legged man. They were all for the right foot, size nine. Look, lady. Almost everything that comes here for sale originally belonged to somebody who had to leave a hotel without paying. Stands to reason they wouldn't leave much of value behind. Usually old phone books or bricks wrapped up."

But the auctioneer, a wiry little man in shirt-sleeves and a grayish derby, was hammering with his gavel. "Let's get the show on the road, folks. Hurry-hurry-hurry ..."

Miss Withers found herself hurrying into one of the last remaining chairs in the back row, next to a large, very synthetic blonde in a beaver coat, who looked half asleep. She had evidently come here for a place to rest her feet and eat chocolate-covered peanuts.

A massive metal-bound trunk, which was so heavy that the auctioneer suggested it must be filled with gold-dust, was put up for sale and swiftly knocked down for sixteen dollars. Accustomed to the dignity and decorum of the antique and art-gallery sales with their expensive catalogues and silent, coded bidding, the schoolteacher found herself a little out of her depth over here on Ninth Avenue. It might almost have been a country auction in Vermont or Iowa, except for the microphone of the public-address system beside the auctioneer, and the Minsky flavor of his jokes. Hardly pausing for breath, the man sold in rapid succession a hatbox, a wooden case of what might have been carpenter's tools, a bicycle, and several ratty suitcases of fiber or imitation leather, for prices ranging from two to twenty dollars.

After a while Miss Withers felt that she was beginning to get the hang of it. Most of the customers had obviously drifted in to invest a few dollars in a grab-bag, just as they might have taken a chance on a long-shot at Hialeah or a ticket in the Irish Sweep. The bidding was usually brisk and competitive up to ten or fifteen dollars and very definitely bogged down at twenty. Any piece of luggage which looked old or different was fought for on the low level, presumably on the theory that anyone queer enough to own it might have absent-mindedly left the family pearls inside. Most of the successful bidders departed at once, clutching their prizes to their bosoms, eyes fired with the hope of something for nothing.

There was one elderly unshaven man on the aisle, wearing an outsize overcoat, who took to bidding a hopeful "One dollar!" on every item that came up, and then shaking his head sorrowfully when he lost out. Now and then, with elaborate pretensions of secrecy, he comforted himself with a pint bottle concealed under his hat in his lap.

Any luggage that looked well-made or in new condition went to one of the professionals who stood along the wall, at what Miss Withers guessed

was somewhere around half its original retail price, no doubt to appear tomorrow in some little shop window. These purchasers were obviously not counting on the contents of the articles they purchased, but their initial bids were high enough to eliminate most of the audience at once.

Pieces good and bad, big and little, came up without any particular sequence in lot numbers, one at a time. The auctioneer was evidently mixing up the lemons with the peaches. There was nothing for Miss Withers to do but to possess her soul in patience and listen to the gross woman beside her munch chocolate peanuts. At the moment the crowd was being invited to bid on a battered wicker case which resembled an egg crate as much as anything else, and on which the only bid had been the inevitable "One dollar" from the excited little man on the aisle.

"Dollar I'm bid, do I hear five? Four? Do I hear three?"

"Ee-e-eek!" yelped a feminine voice.

"Thank you, ma'am. Three dollars I'm bid—"

But the schoolteacher was standing up. "That wasn't a bid," she cried. "I—I saw a rat or something." She was pointing with trembling finger at the knitting-bag in the lap of the blond woman beside her. "It came out and sniffed at me!"

There was, for the next minute or two, considerable commotion and craning of necks. The auctioneer stopped talking and poured himself a glass of water. But the blonde caught Miss Withers by the arm and tugged. "Sit down. You don't need to be scared of Sugar!" she announced in a stage whisper. Then she reached into the knitting-bag and hauled out a small nude-looking creature with hyperthyroid eyes and a rhinestone collar around its skinny neck. "See? She's a genuine Chihuahua!"

Miss Withers sighed and sank down again. "All right, all right," came the rasping voice of the auctioneer. "If you're through with the kaffyklatch, ladies—one dollar was the last bid on this valuable wicker case. Do I hear two?"

He finally knocked it down to the happy inebriate on the aisle, who had started bidding against himself, quite carried away with the spirit of the thing. But it turned out that he had no money at all. He was hustled up the aisle, clutching his hat and his bottle, and the wicker case was removed to the storeroom. Miss Withers felt her elbow jiggled, and leaped nervously

aside. Then she saw that she was only being offered a cigarette. "Smoke, dearie?"

When she politely begged off, the woman lighted her own with a flourish of a gold-plated gadget monogrammed with twinkling red stones. The schoolteacher felt that the situation called for a return gesture of politeness. "Do you and er—Sugar come to these affairs regularly?"

"Only now and then, dearie. Free entertainment. It beats sitting around the apartment and looking at dirty dishes. And sometimes you can pick up a bargain."

"Yes," said Miss Withers abruptly. "Sometimes you can pick up—a bargain." She rose suddenly and tiptoed along the aisle toward the seat from which the one-dollar bidder had been forcibly removed. Now that he was gone she could see beyond the empty seat the back of a man's neck, a neck that looked oddly familiar. She sank quietly down in the vacated chair and peered cautiously around first on one side and then on the other. It was—it had to be!—Count Stroganyeff. Today he was dressed quietly in a business suit and chewing on an unlighted cigar.

"Hello there!" she whispered in his ear, and the man jumped six inches straight up in the air. When he turned a pale and alarmed face toward her she smelled vodka on his breath. "Don't you remember me?" she went blithely on. "And the revolving door at the Grandee?"

"Oh," he rumbled. "Oh, yes. Nice to run into you again, Mrs.—"

"Looking for bargains in luggage?"

"I like to go to auctions," Stroganyeff said. "Like some people watch building excavations. The import-export business is dull these days, and I have much time on my hands. But I never buy anything."

"That's good. Then we won't be bidding against each other, will we?"

"Certainly not. Matter of fact, I have had about enough of this auction. I have a lunch date anyway." The Russian rose suddenly, grabbed his hat and overcoat, nodded vaguely, and then went hurrying up the aisle. Miss Withers stared after him, wondering.

When she turned back to the business of the day she gave a sudden gasp of surprise and elation, for the next item up for sale was one of the expensive airplane-type bags that had been poor Harriet Bascom's. No use, Miss Withers quickly decided, to send a boy to do a man's work. "Fifty dollars!" she opened briskly.

There was a sudden hush in the auction room. At one fell swoop she had eliminated the grab-bag customers and also discouraged the second-hand clique. "Fifty I'm offered," cried the auctioneer approvingly. "For this fine strong lightweight bag, almost brand-new, with initials in gold. If they don't match your own you can go to court and have your name changed to match—the initials are *H.B.*"

"What did you say?" came a feminine voice from the rear.

"The lady wants to know and I'm a-going to tell her." The auctioneer, who worked on percentage, smelled blood. "The initials are *H.B.!*"

"Then I'll just have to say seventy-five!" It was the blonde in beaverskin.

"Eighty!" said Miss Withers, as the man looked hopefully toward her.

"Eighty I'm bid, do I hear—"

"Ninety!"

"Ninety—er, ninety-one!" the schoolteacher countered.

But it just didn't seem to be her day. A few minutes later she stood in a drugstore phone booth and sighed with relief when at last she heard the Inspector's voice at the other end of the line. "Oscar!" she cried. "I'm in trouble. I need money, quite a good deal of money, and I need it right away."

"Arrested again? Well, I'll give you the name of a good bail-bond outfit."

"Please! This is no time for cheap Hibernian humor. It isn't *that* kind of trouble. I know you're miffed at me, but you're the only person in the world to whom I can appeal, and—"

"Judas priest in a handbasket! Don't turn on the tears. Oh, all right. Where are you?" She told him. "Sit tight," he said comfortingly.

But there was a line at the teller's window, and after Piper had made his withdrawal it took the Headquarters sedan quite a few minutes to get uptown through the mid-morning traffic, even with the sirens howling like seven banshees. When he finally leaped out on the curb, the money clenched in his fist, he found Miss Withers standing disconsolately in the doorway. "You're all right then?" he demanded with some concern. "I thought maybe—"

"It was good of you to come," she told him dismally. "But it's too late."

“Too late for what?”

“Oh, some awful woman with a nasty little Mexican-hairless lap dog took a fancy to Harriet Bascom’s luggage just because I wanted it, I guess. She outbid me on it piece by piece. I couldn’t go higher because they wanted cash; they wouldn’t take checks.”

“Well, is *that* all!”

“It was important to me, Oscar.”

“Sure, sure. You had another of your hunches. What you wanted with some dead woman’s old clothes anyway—”

“Some *murdered* woman’s, Oscar.”

“Too bad, but auctions are funny. People get excited. I bet right now the dame who outbid you is wishing she hadn’t. Maybe if you offered her what she paid—”

But the schoolteacher shook her head. “Somehow I don’t think so. She seemed as pleased as Punch. Besides, she’s gone. She had the six bags piled into a taxi and went off with them, just before you got here.”

“Well, you save money—or I do.” He put the currency back into his billfold. “Now I’m here, can I drop you somewhere?”

“Why—yes, just a minute. I’ll be right back.”

The Inspector was resigned to the fact that her just-a-minutes were usually at least a quarter of an hour long. This time she stretched it even a little more, but finally she came down the auction stair, staggering under the weight of a venerable cowhide valise. “And what,” he said critically, “is that thing?”

“It’s a perfectly good bag, with plenty of wear in it!” she said defensively. “I found out that when you buy anything you have to put down your name and address, so when I signed I had a look at what that woman wrote down when she paid her four hundred and eighty dollars for the bags I really wanted. She was a Mrs. Herbert Baker, of 1117 West Fifty-Sixth Street.”

“So she bought the bags because they had her husband’s initials, eh?” Piper pointed to the faded, almost illegible initials on the valise. “I suppose you bought this venerable relic because it had *W.O.B. Jr.* on it?”

“No, Oscar, I—”

“Then why in thunderation did you?”

“I don’t exactly know.”

“I do. You just couldn’t bear going to an auction and coming away empty-handed!” He held the car door for her. “How much did you invest in that antique?”

“Seven dollars. And—”

Offended at his derisive laughter, Miss Withers rode home the rest of the way in hurt silence, refusing even to let him lug the valise up the stairs for her.

The thing stood in the middle of her living-room the rest of the morning, its stout old-fashioned brass lock resisting her best efforts with a bent hairpin. Talleyrand came sniffing around with considerable interest, especially when she shook it and it rattled. There was no use trying to guess at the contents—the weight of the valise itself was too considerable.

Finally Miss Withers gave it up and had a sketchy lunch, more or less spoiled by the amazed and incredulous poodle who sat close by her knee, begrudging her every bite she took. Missing breakfast was bad enough, but this—

“If you doubt my word,” she told him, “you can look it up for yourself in the book. You’re a grown dog. Only puppies have three meals a day.”

Unconvinced, Talleyrand sat up and waggled his paws.

“For the last time, *no!*”

With the facility of one descended from a long line of dogs who had trod the boards and worn the buskin, Talley assumed the role of the poor little match-girl. He was an orphan dog, dying of hunger in a cold world. His cheeks were sunken, his ribs stuck out, his belly clung to his backbone.

“Nothing at all until dinner-time tonight,” his mistress said firmly. She carefully adjusted a chain around the refrigerator door, in case privation drove the poodle to forget an earlier object lesson involving a lamb chop filled with red pepper. Then she set out to find a locksmith.

Returning an hour or so later, empty-handed and footsore, she found Jeeps and Tad parked outside her door in a flaming red Buick convertible. “Well, you have to do something to celebrate being made fifteenth assistant-manager of the Grandee,” he said proudly.

“I thought for a moment you’d been made fire chief,” the schoolteacher said. Jeeps suggested that she come for a ride with them. “I think not. But if you have the time, you might haul me and a suitcase I bought at the auction this morning over to the locksmith’s on Broadway. I

went to several places, but they all said they were too busy to come over and pick the lock for me, and now that I've bought a pig in a poke I'm consumed with curiosity to see what I won."

Tad announced that nothing would give him greater pleasure, and the three went up the stairs together, Miss Withers giving them a brief fill-in on her morning's fiasco as they climbed. She unlocked the door and pointed. "There's the thing—" Then she gasped.

The cowhide valise was beyond the help of any locksmith. It had been tipped over and neatly gutted, the ancient and cheese-rotten leather showing everywhere the marks of eager canine teeth. The oddments which had been inside were strewn about the floor, except for what had once been a large box of imported liqueur chocolates. Talleyrand lay snoozing on the sofa, surrounded by a telltale scattering of debris which included cardboard and paper lace and candy-shells. He smelled to high heaven of chocolate and of something else rich and fruity.

"You bad, bad dog!"

Talley opened his eyes, which appeared to be slightly crossed, hiccuped boozily, and went back to sleep again.

Jeeps and Tad were down on their knees, straightening up the mess. "Hey, maybe you didn't waste your seven bucks after all," the girl sang out. "Here's something! It's a high-school yearbook for 1926—and guess what name is written in it!"

"Harriet Bascom," said the schoolteacher. "It seemed to me that she must have had some luggage with her when she came to the big city. The bag may originally have been the property of some relative—you'll notice that there is the same last initial. But I must admit that it was something more than a lucky guess on my part. You see, there were six pieces of new luggage that the woman bid me out of, but the lot number on this was 568-7, so I took a chance and bought it as a sort of consolation prize."

"Some prize," Tad Belanger observed. "Here's a picture of her when she graduated with the senior class. Look at that boyish bob."

"Oh, dear," said Miss Withers suddenly. "Harriet was class poet, and she was voted the one most likely to settle down and raise a family. You know, I feel a little like a Peeping Tom."

"But it's your property now—you bought it," Tad pointed out reasonably.

Jeeps leaped to her feet. "Well, *you* may have to look through the stuff, but Tad and I don't. Come on, fifteenth-assistant-lover-boy, let's go out and log a few more miles on Belanger's Folly." Then they went clattering down the stairs.

Half an hour later Miss Withers surveyed her notebook, in which she had made an inventory of the contents of Harriet Bascom's valise: *Five dance programs, circa 1927; eleven picture postcards, views of Mexico D.F.; racetrack program, Saratoga, summer 1948; pint silver-filigree flask, partly full; Brownie camera, no film; wooden letter-opener, souvenir of Devil's Lake; box of liqueur chocolates, half full (estimated); deck of cards, deuce missing; five books*—Po-Kip-San 1926, Numerology Can Change Your Life, 80 Ways to Play Solitaire, *and Swinburne's Poems and Ballads (from Elwood, Christmas, 1925); five issues of monthly Consumers' Guide; one worn rubber girdle; one pair of felt slippers.*

And that was all. Miss Withers studied the pathetic little collection of odds and ends for a long time. Too bad there hadn't been a diary. But she had a very good idea that Mr. Nemo had already been prospecting here. He would have seen to it that nothing incriminating remained behind.

There still remained the task of gathering up the wreckage of the valise, scraps of leather to be thrown out with the trash and never referred to again—except of course by the Inspector, who would probably never let her hear the last of how she had wasted seven dollars. At the moment the schoolteacher would almost have liked to throw out Talleyrand along with the rubbish. "Look at you!" she remarked. "Sleeping off your jag, and leaving me to clean up the mess! A dog who can smell candy through half an inch of solid leather—"

It seemed as if there was enough cowhide to make several valises, but of course the case had been heavily lined, and had a double bottom besides. Then something caught her eye, and she forgot to breathe. . . .

A little later, when her heart had stopped pounding, she picked up the phone. The Inspector wearily answered and she said quickly, "Oscar, tell me this! When you purchase an article at an auction like that, do you have legal title to the contents, no matter what?"

"Why, sure, unless it could be proved stolen property. That's why people go to those sales. Why? Don't tell me you've found the original deed to Brooklyn Bridge?"

“The valise I bought for seven dollars,” she informed him coolly, “was the one Harriet Bascom originally brought from Poughkeepsie. It was part of the same lot, but it wasn’t put up for sale with her new luggage. It was full of mementos and keepsakes—”

“You mean *Poughkeepsakes*? Look, Hildegarde, even on this desk job I have work to do. There are some people waiting outside to see me. Run along like a good girl and peddle your papers, will you?”

“Why—why, yes!” she said, in a very odd tone. “I’ll do just that.” And she hung up. After all, this didn’t seem the time to tell Oscar that Harriet Bascom had had more than \$11,000 tucked away in the false bottom of that valise.

Besides, she had plans for it.

*“For a desperate disease, a desperate cure.”*

—Montaigne

## 10

THE STAIRS WERE DARK, NARROW AND STEEP—but Talleyrand the poodle, who would try anything once, went lunging up. Miss Withers clung somehow to the leash and arrived at the top rumpled and out of breath. The sign on the door, in a gay hodgepodge of colored letters, read simply *Jonathan*. She settled herself with a shake, and knocked.

Then the artist stood in the doorway, smiling and wiping his hands on a loose linen smock. “Mrs. Goggins! You have thought about it. You have come to sit.”

She entered a little living-room furnished and decorated with a deceptive simplicity. Those chairs, the low divan, the coffee table and lamps had all been designed by a master and made by the loving hands of a craftsman in wood. “Oh, you do remember me?” she asked. “But I didn’t ever tell you my name, did I? Though you called me by it that day on the street. At least you called me—”

“Of course. I ask the barman your name that day we meet. You were dressed a little differently, perhaps. But the hair, the make-up, the clothes—I do not see them, I see what is underneath. Only so can one paint portraits.”

“Really?” The schoolteacher pulled her coat a little more closely about her. “Might I see some of your work, Mr. Jonathan?”

There was only the faintest hesitation. “But of course. One moment, one moment.” The man almost pushed her into a chair. “If you will excuse me—”

And he disappeared into what was presumably his studio, carefully closing the door behind him. Miss Withers rose suddenly to her feet and tiptoed across the room, pressing her ear to the panel. There were faint noises—something bumped, and there was the creak of a hinge and the slam of a cupboard door.

“I wonder just what he’s doing?” she remarked to Talley, who had chosen the eggshell divan for a throne. But the schoolteacher was back in the chair again when Jonathan returned.

“You will come in now? I have some of my best things here—I am getting ready for an exhibition, so I borrow them back.”

The big bare studio room was like nothing she had imagined. There was a wide skylight, and the entire north wall had been knocked out and replaced with glass, now partially covered with tan monk’s-cloth curtains that touched the floor. There was an easel of heavy wood, solid as a pedestal; there were a dozen or so ornate chairs, one of which stood on the model’s platform with a Spanish shawl draped over the back. One wall was lined with cupboards, shelves, and what appeared to be a small chemical laboratory. It was evident that the man ground his own pigments. This was a workroom, and not at all a place for Bohemian orgies as she had half anticipated.

A dozen or so portraits, life-size or larger, leaned against the wall. They were, the schoolteacher guessed, reasonably good examples of recent portraiture, leaning perhaps a little toward the academic. The subjects were all feminine, women arranging flowers, leaning in riding-clothes against a mantelpiece, playing at a spinet, or sitting in big chairs with Siamese cats posed about them. Some of them at first glance seemed to simper a little, but on closer observation she wondered if Jonathan had not mixed a touch of acid in his paints.

The lady with the Siamese was cool and lovely—but the cat in her lap was acutely cross-eyed and had six toes on one paw. A dark and haughty beauty arranged the flowers—but the greenery in her hands was poison ivy. The music on the spinet was written in ukulele chords, and the booted lady who leaned against the mantelpiece had a silver fork in her hand, evidently about to eat from the dinner plate reflected in the slanting mirror. Yet apart from these derisive touches there was nothing to interest Miss Withers. The women were all strangers.

Jonathan sensed something. “You are disappointed,” he said quickly. “But I would not have painted you like these. You I would not prettify. I would like to paint you with a child’s doll in your arms for contrast, an old-fashioned rag doll—”

Miss Withers suddenly swayed on her feet, clutching his arm. “I’m a little faint,” she whispered. “The stairs. Could I have a glass of water?”

As soon as he had left the room she flew to the cupboard doors. Inside the first were only old costumes, rolls of canvas, bundles of picture-

molding, and rags. The second held drawing-paper, tattered sketchbooks, old frames, and more rags. Talleyrand felt that it might also contain mice, and managed to get in her way. But she turned to the third door—

“You’re getting warmer,” came an encouraging voice from the doorway. The artist came toward her, and she backed hastily behind the poodle. “Feeling better now?” There was no glass in his hand.

“I was only—the dog smelled something—”

“Go on, open the other cupboard.”

“No, I—”

“But I insist!” When she still hesitated, Jonathan flung open the door, disclosing a stack of old paintings, most of them half finished. There were three or four life studies, thin anemic-looking feminine nudes, as stylized and sexless as dummies in a store window.

“Come, come,” said Miss Withers, rapidly regaining confidence. “Don’t tell me you went to all the trouble of hiding those chilly-looking females before you’d let me in here. You rushed in here to hide something else!”

“And what would I have to hide?”

“The portrait of a woman—a woman who is dead.”

He slowly closed the cupboard, and then turned. “Who are you really, and what do you want here?”

“Why, I—”

“When a person feels faint, the blood leaves the head. You were blushing.”

“Was I?” She took a deep breath. “Young man, perhaps we should have a showdown. I am not Mrs. Goggins, I am not a wealthy patron of the arts, and I have no interest whatever in having my portrait painted. I came to the Hotel Grandee in disguise, in search of a murderer who has done away with four—no, five women, and perhaps more.”

“So? And now you come to me?” He shrugged. “You think that perhaps I hate women? If that were true, I would not need to murder them. I have my brushes, my paints. I can dissect a woman, lay her bare, reduce her to absurdity. Sometimes I paint like that. But I destroy the paintings, for they would be bad for business. And it is my ambition to be unique among artists, and to die rich.”

“Did you,” Miss Withers fumbled in her handbag, “did you ever dissect one of these?” And she showed him four photographs.

Jonathan looked at them, without reaction. “No,” he said simply. “None of them ever sat for me.” Then he pointed. “But I think—I am sure I made a sketch of that one. It was two or three months ago, in the hotel coffee shop.”

“Mae Carter!”

He shrugged. “I did not know her name. She admired the wash drawing, and then she offered me five dollars for it—as if I am a chalk-artist in a Village window!”

“And the man who was with her?” the schoolteacher prompted.

“She was alone. I do not sketch women with escorts; they sometimes object. But she would not have been an interesting subject anyway. None of them would.” He handed back the four photographs.

“And why not? You don’t like the bones?”

“It is because they all wear the same mask. It is one too many women show nowadays, a sad, silly mask. It says to the discerning eye that youth has passed by and beauty is going and they have no man. They want to get married.”

“You mean they still dream romantic dreams of a knight on a white charger?”

But the artist did not mean that at all. “Once, but no more. Now they just want a man of their own. They want something solid, they want security. They are starved for security, like a cat that mews at any door when winter is coming on. You, you are not like that. You have an inner completeness—perhaps it is because you are a detective.”

“An amateur detective,” she corrected him. “A snoop, really.”

“But you are a very brave woman,” he said. “Do you *really* want to see the picture that I put away before I admitted you?”

“Of course!”

Jonathan went back to the cupboard again and pulled out a canvas which had been tucked ’way in back, its face to the wall. Still wet and unfinished, it was an oil painting of an angular figure in a bathing-suit of the Gay Nineties, with sleeves, legs, skirt, and flounces, holding water-wings and dipping a toe gingerly in the ocean. The face was Miss Withers’s own, copied from the drawing pinned to the stretcher.

“Ee-e-ek!” she cried out. “It’s—it’s libelous!” Then she began to laugh, until the tears came into her eyes.

“Mr. Jonathan,” she said at last, “I think I have a commission for you, after all.”

And so it was settled. Miss Withers followed the eager poodle down the long steep stairs again, feeling somehow that the Rubicon was crossed. The cold war between herself and Mr. Nemo was entering into its hot phase.

She took no one except Jeeps Davidson into her confidence. It was a temptation, of course, to tell the Inspector, just to see his reaction. The man would almost certainly swallow his cigar when he heard of the money in the valise. So Harriet Bascom had committed suicide because she was destitute, eh?

“But I know exactly what they would say down at Headquarters,” the schoolteacher told Jeeps at lunch that day. “First off they would insist that I turn over the money to the police property custodian on one pretext or another, and I’m not going to have it tied up in red tape and put away in a safe. And that Captain Gruber who has taken the Inspector’s old job at Homicide would point out that we couldn’t prove that Harriet even knew the money was there—she might have inherited the valise from some relative who died suddenly before he could tell anybody about his hidden wealth.”

The girl looked startled. “Say, maybe—”

“Nonsense. The money is mostly in hundreds, current series, with no big-size bills or recalled gold certificates among them. Does that sound like a miser’s musty old hoard?” Jeeps had to agree that it did not.

“If Oscar Piper were back at his old desk, and hadn’t lost his grip, it might be different. But his hands are tied, at the moment. However, mine are not. And if this is a poker game, then I have aces cheek-to-cheek. What’s the matter?”

“Swallowed something the wrong way,” said Jeeps meekly, sipping water.

“As I was saying, I am going to take the bull by the horns and drop a depth bomb that will blow the top right off this Inferno, and—”

“Take it easy!” The girl looked at her with worried eyes. “Miss Withers, you’ve been overdoing it. Maybe you ought to take a vacation—

you've got the money now. Why don't you go to Bermuda or somewhere for a couple of weeks?"

"Child, I look on that money as a sacred trust! I'm keeping a record of every penny I spend, and—"

The telephone interrupted her. Surprisingly enough, it was the Inspector. "What have you been up to now?" he demanded. "Have you been pulling any more fast ones around the Grandee?"

"Of course not! Except the experiment with the window that evening, and you know all about that."

"Well," he said, "I just got a call from Max Brady, and he's coming down here to see me about something—wanted an appointment for three o'clock. You're sure you haven't been stepping on his toes again?"

"Quite sure," she promised. "But it's an idea. Did you say three o'clock?"

"Now, Hildegarde! Don't you go—"

"I'm not going, I'm coming," she interrupted. Miss Withers hung up the phone and turned to Jeeps. "My child, the watched pot is beginning to boil."

The reception room at the Municipal Building was large and drafty, with hard chairs and the bewhiskered portraits of ex-commissioners on the wall. Miss Withers noticed with some relief that the policewoman who was the Inspector's secretary, while she might have blue eyes, also had a build which would have made her good material for the Notre Dame football squad. "I have an appointment," the schoolteacher announced brightly, and went sailing on inside. It was only a few minutes past three, but Mr. Brady was already in a huddle with the Inspector, who looked oddly small and shrunken behind his vast new mahogany desk. "I hope I'm not late?" she said.

"Not late enough," Piper told her. "Mr. Brady, I believe you know Miss Withers, the champion gate-crasher and self-appointed gadfly to the Department?"

Today Brady was dressed like a Wall Street partner, in a Chesterfield, imported bowler, and gray spats. He smiled and shook Miss Withers by the hand with what seemed complete cordiality. "Glad you're here," he told her. "You may be interested in what I came down here to report. Besides, I

guess I owe you a sort of apology for blowing up the other day. But the hotel means a lot to me, and I resented the suggestion that there was any funny business going on."

"Even if there was—and is?" she jabbed.

"At first," Brady continued frankly, "I thought you were just a nut. Snooping around the hotel in a fright-wig and false eyelashes—what would anybody figure? But after we had our little run-in out in the street the other evening, I went back to my office and got to wondering—"

"About Harriet Bascom?"

He nodded. "I'm not saying I agree with you about the importance of whether Muller could have seen from the street whether the window was open or not. I think the reason the man had to quit pro football was because of his eyes."

"The doorman had 20/20 vision when it came to spotting me in the street and running to report to you!"

"That's as it may be. Piper here knows how trustworthy is the testimony of witnesses to any serious accident. But what I came down to say is this. I got to looking back through some of the old records and bills in the business office yesterday. And I found that on the morning of August sixteenth, the day Harriet Bascom took her dive, she—or somebody in her suite—put through a long-distance call to Santa Barbara, California, the time of the slip being eleven-thirty."

"Whom to?" demanded the schoolteacher eagerly.

"The charge-slip didn't show. It wasn't a person-to-person call; she just asked to be connected with Information out there. But the charges were twenty-two dollars and twenty-five cents, so she must have had quite a chat with somebody."

"I don't suppose," Miss Withers put in hopefully, "that the operator listened?"

He stiffened. "Not at the Grandee, ma'am. It would have meant her job, and besides, the girls at our switchboard are too busy to have time for eavesdropping. Anyway, a few minutes after the call was completed, the hotel maid came in to do Miss Bascom's suite and found her crying, practically in hysterics. So there it is, if you can make anything of it." Brady was looking at the Inspector.

“Thanks,” said Piper. “I’ll see it gets to the captain who’s in charge now.”

The hotel detective nodded and lighted a cigarette. “I take it then that the Bascom case is officially reopened?”

“I wouldn’t quite say that.” The Inspector looked sideways at Miss Withers. “There’s been some commotion, but no new evidence except from the business about the window.”

“Oscar, if you knew—” Miss Withers almost blurted out her secret then and there, but Brady was already talking.

“I suppose it has to be,” the man said, shaking his head. “Why did that damn-fool woman have to pick our hotel anyway? Well, let’s hope it gets cleared up quickly and as quietly as possible. If there’s anything else we can do at our end—”

“Sure, sure,” Piper told him. “But it’s not my baby. See Gruber.”

Brady turned suddenly toward Miss Withers. “I have my car. Can I run you uptown? I don’t want any hard feelings. If you’d only come and told me beforehand, when you planned putting on that phony Mrs. Goggins act —”

“If she’d told *anybody*!” Piper put in.

“—I wouldn’t have thrown a monkey wrench in the machinery,” Brady finished.

Miss Withers reminded him, not without a touch of bitterness, that it hadn’t been a wrench, but a pair of handcuffs. “But I suppose you meant well. Yes, I think I shall accept your kind offer of a ride uptown. Good afternoon, Oscar. You’ll be hearing from me one of these days.”

Had there been a touch of a threat in her tone? The Inspector watched them go out together, thick as thieves. Then he grinned. “If the old girl thinks she’s going to put anything over on Brady, then she has a surprise coming.”

But the surprise, when the time came, was on the other foot.

“What you may not realize,” Brady was saying as they came out into the street, “is that it would be impossible for any con-man like your imaginary murderer to work a big hotel for very long. Such men are known; they have police records. All hotel detectives such as me and my men take a day off every so often and spend the time looking over the thousands of photographs down at Centre Street.”

“I know,” admitted Miss Withers. “I put in several afternoons in the Rogues’ Gallery last week. But I didn’t find any familiar face—not anyone that I’d seen around the hotel. Which proves, does it not, that Mr. Nemo has never been mugged?”

“Mugged,” he corrected, unsmiling. He was holding open the door of a black Lincoln sedan, as comfortable and solid and middle-aged as its owner. “Or could it mean that he doesn’t exist, except in your fertile imagination?”

She waited until they were under way. “Mr. Brady, I have a feeling that you know I’m correct in my suspicions—or that you’re afraid I am, which is almost the same thing. Only, being a man, you hate to admit that you may not be infallible.”

“Ouch!” he said, and swung the sedan around the corner. “Let’s put it like this. The management of the Grandee hopes that this is a big fuss about nothing. But now the fuss is made, we want very much to get to the root of the matter, and quick.” Brady hesitated. “I have the impression that the Inspector is off the case, but that you are very much still on?”

“Correct.”

“I’d like to make you a little proposition. You see, I looked you up and you’ve been lucky with some important cases in the past. The hotel has a slush-fund for such purposes, and we’d like to have you represent us in getting this cleared up.”

“Well!” gasped Miss Withers.

“There was one bit of information I kept back,” Brady went on. “About that phone call—the charge-slip didn’t show the number that Miss Bascom finally talked to out in California, but the hotel’s monthly phone bill did.” He kept his eyes glued on the traffic ahead, driving with extreme conservatism. “I thought it was something that possibly could be better handled privately.”

“I’m listening,” the schoolteacher said.

“I thought that if the hotel were to assume all expenses and a reasonable charge for your time, you might consider taking a run out there.” Then Brady caught the expression in her face. “What’s the matter—something funny?”

“It’s the second time today that somebody has suggested that I get out of town. But frankly, Mr. Brady, I don’t believe this case is going to be solved by my gallivanting off anywhere. No, I’m not having any.”

“Sorry,” he said. All the rest of the way uptown he made polite conversation about the weather, the dirt and noise of the city, ending up with a monologue on farms and farming—a subject in which she was not in the least interested. Some day, he confided, he hoped to be able to retire to his own acreage and grow his own meat, vegetables, and flowers. “I have a green thumb,” he concluded as he set her down at her own corner.

By the same token, Miss Withers thought, she should have a bloody nose. “They say everyone should have a hobby,” she remarked. “Yours is farming—mine’s murder.”

“I know—and our offer of co-operation is still open, whether you want to follow the Santa Barbara lead up or not. The number out there was Arroyo 184.”

“Really? Well, thank you for the buggy-ride, Mr. Brady.”

“Glad there are no hard feelings. And lots of luck to you.” He waved his hand, and then drove sedately on up Central Park West.

“He didn’t say what kind—good or bad,” Miss Withers reminded herself a little pawkishly as she strode down the short block to her own door. As usual, Talleyrand’s ecstatic welcome almost knocked her off her feet. Doglike, the poodle always greeted her with a brass band and the keys to the city, even when she had been away ten minutes. “You’d think by the fuss he makes that I’d come back from the dead!” the schoolteacher observed to Jeeps when the girl came in a little later.

“Only you don’t ever, do you?” Jeeps said in a strange little voice. “They’re with you every minute—the *dead*, I mean.”

Miss Withers peered at her curiously. “Alice Davidson Junior, what ails you?”

“Nothing. Maybe a rabbit just ran over my grave.” The girl tossed her coat onto a chair and dropped to her favorite supine position on the rug. “Maybe I’m not cut out for this sort of work. Don’t you ever think it’s a little ghoulisch? I mean, digging into murder and things like that. My aunt and the others are dead and gone, aren’t they? What earthly good will it do to go snooping and prying—”

The schoolteacher gasped indignantly. “Should we then emulate the misguided people of India, who let cobras run loose and bite people?”

“I know, I know,” Jeeps said with deep weariness. “But one gets so jittery, and so suspicious of everybody and everything.” But she would not

say of what in particular.

“Have you and fifteenth-assistant dreamboat had a quarrel?”

Jeeps shook her head. She was staring at an unlighted cigarette as if she had forgotten what such things were for. “Come, child,” said Miss Withers briskly. “The larder’s bare, and somebody has to go marketing. You’ll be home for dinner, I take it?”

“Oh, I guess so. Let’s just open a tired old can of beans or something.”

“Talley and I, at least, are meat-eaters. Come along, you need the air.”

The girl sighed, but rose to her feet. As usual Talleyrand was eager enough for two, and they had to take turns being anchor for the dog and trying to prevent him from salvaging second-hand chewing gum from the sidewalk. “Thank heavens,” said the schoolteacher, “he hasn’t taken up smoking as yet.”

Jeeps pointed out listlessly that they had already passed the market.

“I thought that while we’re in the mood for a walk we might just go on downtown and pay a call on Mrs. Herbert Baker. Because it seems odd to me that a woman who didn’t even have help at home to do the breakfast dishes should be carrying around five or six hundred dollars in cash. Besides, when I was sitting next to her in the auction room she flashed a gold monogrammed lighter, and whatever the initials, they *weren’t H.B.*”

“But after all, you got the valise that counted. What do you care about the rest of Harriet’s stuff?”

“I care why somebody else cared.” The little procession marched on in silence until it finally bumped its nose on a pier at the foot of 56th Street. “Dear me!” cried Miss Withers. Number 1117 would have had to be halfway across the Hudson.

“Was the woman a mermaid or something?” Jeeps wanted to know.

“There was something fishy about her, certainly. Oh, well. Another dry run.”

“It’s me,” the girl burst out suddenly, with deep bitterness. “You shouldn’t have brought me along. I’m a Jonah. I’m the worst jinx in the world. Nothing ever goes right when I’m around!”

Miss Withers decided that Jeeps was tired, and managed to hail a taxicab, but even after they were back home again the girl refused to be comforted. It was late that night, and the schoolteacher was trying to read herself to sleep with a copy of Sir Thomas Browne’s *Urn Burial* when she

suddenly sat up in bed. There was the sound of muffled but unmistakable sobbing from across the room. "Jeeps!" she said softly.

There was only silence. "*Alice!*"

"I'm asleep," came the unsteady voice.

"You certainly are not. Why don't you tell me what's wrong?"

"Everything is! It's no use, I'm just a hindrance to you. I'd better quit my job tomorrow and pack up and go home."

"Come, come. You mustn't let these little setbacks discourage you. Aren't we almost ready to take the bull by the horns and set off a depth-bomb that will smoke Mr. Nemo out into the open? Isn't the Project ready to go—almost?"

"Oh, that's not it. I—I've just been doing mental arithmetic. Problem —how long does it take a one-hundred-dollar-a-month bellboy to save up enough for a three-thousand-dollar convertible?"

There was a long, long silence.

"He told me it was a birthday present from a rich uncle of his," Jeeps blurted out. "But when I first met him we were kidding about horoscopes and he said he was born under the sign of Gemini—that isn't February, it's May and June!"

"Some men lie all of the time and all men lie some of the time," Miss Withers said as comfortingly as she could, and turned out the light. But the only sound sleep enjoyed in the apartment that night was Talleyrand, perched on the top of the kitchen stove.

Tomorrow, as the saying goes, was another day. It happened to be the first day in which Tad Belanger laid aside forever the monkey-jacket of his bellhop days to enter on the late shift behind the hotel desk clad in quiet pin-stripe flannel.

"Well, Mr. Belanger, how goes it?"

Tad started suddenly, for he had been in a sort of a daze. And he couldn't get used to being mistered, and especially not by Brady. The chief of security looked harried this evening; he had come down into the lobby without his usual hat and coat, and though it was after seven he had not yet changed into dinner clothes.

"It goes just fine," the young man answered hastily. This was no time to explain that he felt lonely and strange in his new eminence, that he

missed the free and easy camaraderie of the other bellboys, who now looked at him as enlisted men look at a second lieutenant. Nor could he find words to explain his feeling that somewhere in the normal humming of the great hotel had come a strange vibration, a harsh note of strain.

“Good,” said Brady absently. “Er—I just received a phone call. That Withers woman is up to something. Any idea what it is?”

“No, sir. My contact in that direction has petered out. Miss Davidson hangs up when I call.”

“Too bad.” Brady looked annoyed. “Seen Jerry Forrest around?” Tad nodded and pointed across the lobby. The public-relations expert was talking to Wanda, the girl at the theater-ticket agency counter, but her eyes chilled as Brady bore down in their direction. She murmured something about a nice pair in the sixteenth row center. “Save it, sister,” Brady said. “Jerry Forrest wouldn’t pay to see *Adam and Eve* with the original cast, and besides, he’s going to be busy tonight.”

“Now who’s in trouble?” Forrest demanded as the two men walked a little away.

“You are, I guess. Remember Miss Withers alias Goggins? Well, she just phoned, taking advantage of a polite gesture I made yesterday. She wants some advice in your line, so go over and see her.”

“Why can’t she hop on her broomstick and fly over here?”

Brady was unsmiling. “It’s a delicate situation. I ran into her downtown and asked her to work with us on this thing. If you can’t lick ‘em, jine ‘em. Now she’s got some bee in her bonnet and I want you to find out what it is.”

“The things I have to do for a room and a bath!”

“Don’t underestimate the old battle-ax just because she wears comic-valentine hats. Carrie Nation was a silly dame too, but she damn near ruined the saloon business. I’m scared of her.” Forrest started to laugh, but Brady held up his hand. “Scandal can ruin a hotel—look at the old Manger over on Seventh. So play along with her.”

“Oh, my poor aching back!” Forrest said.

It was worse, if anything, than he had anticipated. At Miss Withers’s apartment there was no sign whatever of the decorative little Davidson girl, but to make up for that Talleyrand was much in evidence. Before the first amenities were over, Jerry’s lounge suit was well decorated with apricot-

colored fuzz. And then the happy, excited schoolteacher showed him what she had up her sleeve.

“Yipe!” he cried, when he could talk. “You—you just can’t *do* that!”

“But I just *am*!”

“First of all—it’ll cost a mint of money.”

“I have a mint of money, or at least enough. Thanks to that poodle. Down, Talley! Mr. Forrest doesn’t want to hold you on his lap when he’s working.”

“But I’m not working—”

“You will be, in a minute. Here’s everything laid out on the dining-room table. It’s very rough, of course. The drawing and the photographs leave something to be desired, too. Now be frank with me, Mr. Forrest, just how do you think this idea of mine ought to be handled?”

“Ma’am,” he said earnestly, “I’ll tell you. With a pair of tongs!”

He had finished and gone, and Miss Withers was busily changing back a *midtown hotel* to the *Hotel Grandee* on the copy he had assisted her with, when Jeeps came home shortly after midnight from the last show at the neighborhood movie. The schoolteacher looked up, “My, it must have been a sad picture. What did you see, *The Snake Pit*?”

“No. Just some tired old comedy or other.”

“Oh? And you laughed so much your eyes are still red and puffy?”

But the girl had disappeared into the bedroom. A little later Miss Withers followed her. Jeeps, fully dressed, lay face down across the bed. “He phoned you again,” the schoolteacher said.

“Did he?” Jeeps sat up. “Not that I care.”

“Of course not. But he did phone, and that’s more than I can say for Oscar.”

“Did you tell Tad I had a date?”

“I said you were out, young woman. Do your own lying.”

“Did—did Mr. Forrest say anything?”

“Not about Tad. He seemed a bit overwhelmed with the Project. But he does know his trade. Everything is ready. The fuse is laid, and I set fire to it tomorrow morning. All we can do now is to sit tight and hold onto our hats.”

It would have been well had she given the same warning to Inspector Oscar Piper, for the explosion when it came a few days later found him as unprepared as the hapless inhabitants of Hiroshima. He had come down to his office that morning early and as usual had spent the first few minutes in glaring at the place. He missed the old room at Centre Street, the cheery clatter of the teletype machine in the corner, the tension of Headquarters. On this exalted level he learned about what was going on only after it happened, after it was cold and usually ready for the Closed file.

Probationer Fink marched in with the morning mail, all neatly opened for his perusal. Over on Homicide there hadn't been much bothering with letters. They worked with the ticker, the phone, or dragged information out of stoolies. Seconds counted. He saw that Fink waited, pencil and notebook in hand. "Later," Piper told her. "There's nothing here that couldn't wait until next month anyhow."

She shrugged and went out. The Inspector pushed the mail aside, hoping it would get lost among the clutter of *Out* and *In* baskets, ash trays, lighters, leather memo pads, pen sets, and paperweights. Then something on the top of the pile caught his eye. At first it had appeared to be only another *Wanted* flyer, following the usual official format and type-style, but there were four photos here instead of the usual full-face and profile of some pug-ugly public enemy—four smiling, attractive feminine faces, all staring at the camera.

Across the top was the legend: *Have You Seen These Women?* and beneath each photo was a name and physical description, couched in somewhat flowery language. Below that, in bold-face type: *These four women are thought to be among the victims of a modern Bluebeard. They have all disappeared within the last five months, and their last known address was the Hotel Grandee on Park Avenue, NYC. A reward of \$5,000 will be paid to anyone giving information which leads to the discovery of their whereabouts or to the apprehension of their slayer. Contact Acting Chief-Inspector Oscar Piper, New York City Police Headquarters, at Spring 7-3100. ...*

"Judas priest on a red-hot stove!" gasped the Inspector. That was bad enough, but there was a second sheet. It was headed: *Have You Seen This Man?* and there was the reproduction of a pen and wash drawing of a smiling, debonair, middle-aged dandy, dressed to the teeth. The face looked

familiar, hauntingly familiar, until you realized that it was blended of a dozen faces—movie stars, actors, models, all examples of full-blown masculine American beauty.

Below that was a somewhat fanciful and purely imaginary description of Miss Withers's Mr. Nemo, and then, again in bold-face: *This man is suspected of being responsible for one murder and four disappearances of middle-aged, unattached, well-to-do women. During the past six or seven months he has been allegedly operating in and around the Hotel Grandee, New York City. He is thought to be a resident or a habitué of the hotel. \$5,000 will be paid for information leading to his arrest and conviction. Contact Acting Chief-Inspector Oscar Piper. . .*

“Fink!” he roared. “Get on that phone and get me Miss Hildegarde Withers at her home right away!” Maybe these were only proofs, maybe he could still stop her somehow.

Probationer Fink was already standing in the doorway. She had been there some time. “Did you hear me? Get a move on!”

But she only said, in the voice of Doom, “Assistant-Commissioner Kiley wants you up in the front office, right away.”

*“The dice of the Gods are always loaded.”*

—Erasmus

## 11

IT WAS A BEWILDERED AND slightly punch-drunk Inspector who rang the doorbell of Miss Withers's apartment. Scars of the hour he had spent in the front office rankled in his soul. And then he saw his Nemesis, face to face. "How could you *do* it?" were his first words.

"Why, Oscar, it was easy!" Miss Withers assured him proudly, intentionally mistaking his meaning. "It's what I've been wanting to do all along. Of course I did have some help—an artist prepared the drawing, and there was a little grudging advice from Mr. Forrest, the publicity representative for the hotel, in handling the advertising end of it."

"You mean that besides sending those two daffy flyers to the police of just about every town and city in the land, there's more too?"

"But of course! I naturally wanted to make the biggest splash possible. So I arranged with an advertising agency to run the four pictures, the drawing, and basically the same message in advertisements in one hundred key newspapers. I was thinking of buying radio or television time, but Mr. Forrest advised against that."

"I'm glad somebody advised you against something! Tell me, is the Grandee footing the bill for all this?"

"Why—not exactly. You know, getting the pictures was the hardest part. But Jeeps sent home for one of her aunt, the local news-photo services had shots of Nurse Brinker demonstrating her burpless baby bottle and of Mrs. Mae Carter when she won the radio jackpot give-away. Emma Sue Atkins was harder, but I finally called a Baltimore paper and found a free-lance photographer who'd taken pictures of her outside the courtroom when she settled her suit against the taxi company."

"I didn't mean that." Piper tramped the length of the room and back. "Look, Hildegarde! Just what in blazes do you hope to accomplish with this insane stunt? All along you've maintained that the four women are dead as mutton. What's the idea of plastering their faces all over the country, then—and offering five thousand dollars reward?"

The schoolteacher smiled gently. "Why, to prove that they *aren't* anywhere! Because if they were, this campaign would force them to speak

up—and they can't do that because they're dead. I don't suppose there's much chance of anybody remembering them at this late date—I mean anybody who might have seen them with Mr. Nemo before he did away with them. But he'll start wondering. This whole thing is really an *overt act*, a smoke bomb to force him out into the open. Because he's sure to jump to the conclusion that we know more than we really do."

"We could hardly know any less, could we? I tell you, Hildegarde, the only thing you'll accomplish with all this waste of time and money will be to give the Department a black eye—and to probably get me suspended for three months with loss of pay."

"But why should anybody blame you for what I do?"

"Why? Because," and he almost shouted, "because you had to go and sign my name in big black letters on your posters!"

"I only did that to make it look official and important."

"But it isn't official! You have no authority to offer a reward in the name of the Department, and neither have I. If you'd given me some warning—"

"You'd have stopped me somehow, and don't you deny it. But don't worry. I'm prepared to pay the reward if the situation calls for it."

"How? Out of your pension?" His laugh was bitter. "My main worry is what the trial board will do to me. Kiley is really out after my scalp now. The hearing is set for a week from tomorrow, by the way."

"Oh. Then I'll go straight down to Mr. Kiley's office, or to the Commissioner himself, and explain that it was all my idea and that you had nothing to do with it."

"No!" Piper cried. "You've done enough. For the love of heaven, stay away from Headquarters. You'll only pour fuel on the fire. Can't you just get lost?"

"Very well," she said meekly. "But it did seem to me that the best use I could make of the eleven thousand dollars I found hidden in Harriet Bascom's valise was to use it to avenge her and the other innocent victims."

The Inspector whispered hoarsely, "What did you say?"

"Oscar, I'll tell you. I was going to before, but you brushed me off and told me to go peddle my papers. But please stop pacing the floor like a caged panther. Here, take a comfortable chair and relax."

“Relax, she tells me! With this knife-handle sticking out from between my shoulder blades!” But he sat down stiffly on the edge of a chair and listened.

“So you see?” she concluded. “Harriet didn’t have any motive for suicide, after all. Not with all that money.”

“No? You leap to conclusions like—like a puppy chasing its tail. Suppose this does knock out one motive, there could be others. Suppose she thought she had an incurable disease, or had been disappointed in love, or was a melancholic, or—”

“Fiddlesticks. If she had killed herself for one of those reasons, she wouldn’t have carefully set the stage for the theory of suicide because of financial worry. You’re not being altogether reasonable, Oscar.”

“Reasonable!”

“We’ll just have to catch Mr. Nemo red-handed before a week from tomorrow, that’s all,” she told him comfortingly.

“That’s *all!*!” The Inspector stood up suddenly. “Judas priest in a—in a I don’t know what!” He swallowed, slammed his hat over his ears, and went out with a decided slam of the door.

Jeeps Davidson, who had been exercising Talley in the park, returned a few moments later. “Trouble,” said the girl.

“Talley? What did he do now?” Miss Withers asked absently.

“I mean a man. He’s watching this building from across the street. I think he was there this morning, too.”

“Already?” The schoolteacher perked up her ears. “But it could hardly be Mr. Nemo, in broad daylight. What did he look like?”

“Like anybody. Fairly old—about thirty-five. Gray coat and glasses. He pretended to be reading a newspaper when I looked at him.”

Miss Withers was thoughtful. “Perhaps it’s a reporter, only how would they get my name? Or—She turned suddenly and picked up the telephone. A moment later she was connected with the Hotel Grandee. “Mr. Max F. Brady, please.”

But Brady was out. “Mr. Forrest, then?”

Jerry Forrest was finally located. “Well,” he said, “you’ve gone and done it. The joint here is jumping.”

“You mean the cat is out of the bag already? Mr. Brady knows?”

“Brady and everybody else. He’s on the carpet in the manager’s office right now. Everybody in the hotel is going around looking suspiciously at tall handsome middle-aged bachelors. Ladies won’t ride on the same elevator with Peter Temple, and Count Stroganyeff is mad enough to move out, only he’s a couple of weeks behind with his rent. Reporters, photographers, curiosity-seekers—”

“But how did it get out so soon? We decided against ads in the local papers, on account of the expense.”

“Lady, there was a scarcity of news this week. The wire services, AP and UP and even INS, picked up the story and even ran the ads, pictures and all, on the telephoto machines. You’re making the papers everywhere—front page stuff.”

“Success!” said the schoolteacher. “Beyond my wildest dreams. Er—how did Mr. Brady take it?”

“How’d you expect? The sacred name of the Grandee tied up with crime. He blew his top and went around trying to have people fired—”

“Not Tad Belanger, I hope?”

“No. Me, for one. But I pointed out that he himself sent me over to you and told me to play ball. Anyway, he cooled off after a while—I guess he thought it over and decided he might as well relax and enjoy it. He even tacked up copies of your posters in the lobby, making out like the hotel was solidly behind you.”

“The man amazes me.” Miss Withers thanked him, and hung up. “Dear me, we seem to be reaping the whirlwind,” she remarked to Jeeps, who was busily trying to braid Talley’s topknot.

“Isn’t that nice?” murmured the girl absently.

“Look here, young woman! Your own business is your own business, but you can’t go on like this. Why don’t you have a talk with Tad and ask him straight out how he *really* acquired that new car?”

“Oh, no. I couldn’t!”

“Afraid of what he might tell you?”

“Afraid of what he won’t. I don’t want any more lies.”

“If it comes down to that, what about your own efforts in that direction? Gigi the French maid, and then your story about being a radio actress from Hollywood trying to get Mrs. Goggins married off for the sake of the program, and—”

“That was different!”

“Of course, child.” The schoolteacher sat down beside her. “Listen, you’re not suspecting Tad of being Mr. Nemo, are you? He *is* attractive, perhaps even to older women. But if he was the bellboy who brought up the cocktails for Harriet Bascom shortly before she died, then he couldn’t have very well been the date she was expecting.”

“We only have his word for most of that, and the five-dollar tip and everything. Oh, I know it sounds crazy, but I’m all confused. I can’t see Tad being mixed up in murder, but I suppose every killer since time began has had a wife or sweetheart or mother who couldn’t believe he was capable of it. What happened to me was I went and fell head over heels in love with somebody I didn’t know, like a dope.”

“From hearsay, that’s the way it usually occurs, I think.”

“But it does boil down to this. Tad spends more money than he could possibly make on his job, taking me to dinner and places in the evening when he’s not working, and he does have that new car—”

“I’d still ask him about it, if I were you.”

“Suppose he didn’t do it, but he knows something? That might explain a lot of things, but I’d just as soon have him a murderer as a blackmailer!” Sobbing, the girl suddenly turned and ran out of the room.

“Dear, dear,” said Miss Withers. “Now I have another reason why this case must be wound up in a hurry.” She was suddenly tired of waiting for things to happen. This cat at a mousehole stuff might be all right, but—

Jeeps had said that there was a man hanging about outside. That at least was something tangible to fight. Grabbing up her coat and a hat which Jeeps secretly thought must have been designed by somebody who had heard of hats but never actually seen one, the schoolteacher went dashing out of the place.

The man who leaned casually against a railing across the street wasn’t anyone she had ever seen before. Just a youngish man in glasses, reading a newspaper. He looked up at her as she marched straight at him.

“Young man, have you the correct time?”

He looked at his wrist. “Four-seventeen.”

“Thank you. Then you’ve been standing here for at least seven hours and a half. Looking for somebody, or just lost?”

“I like it here,” he said calmly.

Somewhat at a loss, the schoolteacher hesitated and then walked on. There were times when she wished she were a man for about five minutes. Halfway to the corner, she thought of a devastating comeback and whirled around. But the man in the gray coat had put his paper away and was walking off in the other direction. She quickened her pace, but he kept effortlessly ahead of her. *Afraid of me, is he?* she said to herself. She kept doggedly after him all the way over to the subway, and then suddenly he was gone.

She sighed and decided that now she was out she might as well pick up some groceries and the late afternoon papers. Returning home at last, she received one of the major shocks of her life, for the door was barred and bolted against her, and she had to hammer on it and identify herself before Jeeps would let her in. The girl's face was white as a sheet as she dragged away the heavy chair which had been her barricade.

"What now, for heaven's sake?"

The man from the kennels had come and tried to take Talleyrand away, by forcible means at the end. But the poodle had squirmed out of his grasp and prudently retired to his lair under Miss Withers's bed, refusing to come out. The man had finally left, but he promised Jeeps that he would be back later. "He *can't* take away our precious old Talley, can he?"

The schoolteacher couldn't understand it. "But originally he was so anxious to get rid of the dog that he just dumped it here, and now—What did he have to say?"

"Nothing much. Except that he had a letter from Ethel Brinker."

The universe collapsed beneath Miss Withers's feet. She felt suddenly dizzy, and cold at the toes and fingers. She didn't, she couldn't believe it. Not even when the wizened, smelly man who ran the Elysian Fields Doghaven returned half an hour later and waved the letter in her face, as if it were a subpoena he was serving.

The envelope, postmarked early yesterday morning in Santa Barbara, California, bore air mail and special delivery stamps. Inside was a brief note on plain white dime-store paper, typewritten except for the signature. It read:

*Dear sir:*

*As we haven't got a place of our own yet and my husband doesn't like dogs, this letter is your authority to dispose of the poodle I left to board with you last November. After board bill and charges are satisfied please hold any money coming to me and my husband who is a traveling man will pick it up on his next trip east.*

*Yours,*

*Ethel Brinker Brown RN*

“I guess maybe this puts a different light on things, eh?” said Harris, with an odd, knowing look. “She doesn’t say anything about your being her sister and handling her affairs for her.”

“If the letter is really from her—” began the schoolteacher.

He laughed, and reached into the pocket of his leather jacket to bring out a typed pedigree and an American Kennel Club registration form. “She sent these along in the letter.”

Carefully Miss Withers studied the documents, looking for a flaw that she knew had to be there—and wasn’t. The pedigree was attested by the original breeder of the dog, manager of Pillicoc Kennels, whose name also appeared as registrant of the litter. The name *Ethel Brinker* appeared twice on the registration form, once under *Purchaser* and again under *Signature of person disposing of dog*. As far as the schoolteacher could see, it was the same signature as the one at the bottom of the letter, omitting the married name, of course. She realized that Jeeps was watching her hopefully, fingers crossed, waiting for a minor miracle. But the magic refused to come.

“Well, ma’am,” said Mr. Harris. “If you’re completely satisfied, I’ll just take the tyke and be off.”

“But I thought you were so anxious to get rid of Talleyrand when you had him!”

“Oh, that was because he was always getting out and running away. Regular escape artist, he is. But now I have his papers, I can get a good price for him. Poodles are coming back into popularity now that they’ve stopped clipping them to look like ornamental shrubs.”

“How much, then?” demanded Miss Withers.

“Oh, two or three hundred, maybe more for a fine full-grown male like this one. He’s a son of Pillicoc Palatine, and there’s eight champions in his blood line.”

“But nobody would want an awful old dog like him!” Jeeps burst in. “He raids the icebox and steals steak and chews up suitcases. And he scavenges for old chewing gum and almost knocks people down—”

“I’ll train those puppy tricks out of him, with a whip if necessary,” promised Mr. Harris.

Jeeps suddenly turned and disappeared into the bedroom. Ten minutes later, when Miss Withers came searching for her, she found that both girl and dog had vanished into thin air. At last she thought to look out of the window, and there was Jeeps perched on the fire-escape with the poodle in her arms, ready to make a break for it if the worst came to the worst. “You may come back in now,” said the schoolteacher. “He’s gone.”

“But what—how—?”

“I simply pointed out that we had the dog, and that possession is nine points of the law. I reminded him that I too could demand a board bill for the time Talley was here, plus a fee for training him. And no matter what price he could get for the dog, he himself couldn’t keep anything except a commission and the amount of the board bill. So we finally settled it with my writing him a check for fifty dollars.”

“Whoops!” cried Jeeps. “Talley is saved.” She started to giggle. “I wish I could see the face of that Mr. Brown Ethel married when he comes to the kennel for his money and finds there isn’t any.”

“Anyone who would abandon a dog like this one doesn’t deserve any more. I must confess that I sweetened the transaction somewhat from Mr. Harris’s point of view by giving him an additional fifty for letting me keep Ethel Brinker’s letter.”

“As a bribe, you mean? There’s certainly nothing you want in the letter.”

“It’s what isn’t in it that counts.” The schoolteacher hesitated for a moment. “I think,” she said softly, “that the time has come to make a stab in the dark.” She picked up the telephone and dialed. “Long distance? I want to put through a station-to-station call to Santa Barbara, California.”

Jeeps knelt beside her, tense and excited. “You’re not going to try to call all the Browns in the city?”

“Hush, child.” Into the phone: “The number there is Arroyo 184. That’s right.”

There was some delay while the patient, strained voices of the long-lines operators discussed the clearing of circuits, and then: "We are ready with Santa Barbara," and then a clear, lilting feminine voice said, "Hello—go ahead."

Miss Withers took a deep breath, and went. "Is Ethel there? Ethel Brinker?"

"Nobody by that name, sorry."

"Oh, of course. She'd be using her married name. I mean Mrs. Brown, the nurse."

"Nobody by that name either. We don't have any nurses; this is the Santa Barbara Chamber of Commerce."

"Oh, dear," murmured the schoolteacher, very deflated. Then she cried suddenly, "Just a minute, don't hang up. My name is Withers, and I'm associated with the police department. We are trying to trace a call made from this city to your number last August sixteenth. Would you happen to remember anything about it?"

For some time Miss Withers listened, waiting. "Thank you anyway," she said finally, and replaced the receiver.

"No dice?" begged Jeeps.

"The girl could only remember one long-distance call from New York last summer. It came in early one morning when she was just opening up the office. That checks, allowing for the difference in time zones. It was a woman, too. But there must be a mistake somewhere. Because I can't for the life of me see why Harriet Bascom should have flung herself on the bed in tears because the climate of Santa Barbara is not suited to commercial grapefruit groves!"

*“While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping. . . .”*  
—Edgar Allan Poe

## 12

THE DAY HAD STARTED WITH Miss Hildegarde Withers getting up on the wrong side of the bed, having been awakened by a tentative shaking of her shoulder, much as a very young puppy might shake a very old rat. "You were thrashing about like crazy, and moaning something about 'Open Sesame,'" Jeeps explained. "Are you all right?"

"Just that dratted nightmare again! And for the life of me I couldn't think of the magic words that always wake me up. Talley and I were being chased by mad dogs, and this time one of them was a Chihuahua. I do wish my subconscious wouldn't try to be morbid and funny at the same time."

Even after two cups of strong black coffee and completion of the normal everyday household chores she still could not completely dispel the phantoms. But time was marching on, and if ever the iron was hot, it was now. She picked up the phone and finally was connected with Mr. Brady of the Grandee. "This is Miss Withers—"

"*Oh!*" he answered, in the tone that he might have used had she said that Lucrezia Borgia was calling.

"About that telephone number," she continued. "Arroyo 184. Are you sure you didn't make a mistake?"

"Yes," he said, in the tone of one who never made a mistake and doesn't expect to.

"Well, do you suppose I could just have a peek at that telephone bill?"

If the schoolteacher had expected him to hesitate, she was disappointed. "Certainly. It's here on my desk. And I have some other data which might interest you, though I'd rather not discuss it over the phone."

"Be there in ten minutes," she cried, and hung up. Talleyrand put on his usual act with the leash while she was donning coat and overshoes, but she hardened her heart. "Don't you remember, you were banished forever from the Hotel Grandee for being too friendly with the guests?" Of course, she herself had almost the same thing happen to her. But everything was different now. She and Mr. Brady were allies, or at least co-belligerents.

As she came out into the street Miss Withers took a quick look across the way, but nobody was lurking there behind a newspaper. Farther down

the block a youth with a vacuum cleaner under his arm was ringing doorbells and a thick-set man leaned over a small maroon coupé, but he seemed oblivious to her stare and to everything except the windshield he was scraping. Finally Miss Withers went on to the park corner and hailed a cruising taxi, serene in the knowledge that she could put it down on the expense account she was keeping.

The doorman at the Grandee helped her out and then did a double-take. "Good morning, Mr. Muller. How's the eyesight today?" and she hustled on inside, leaving him staring blankly after her. The lobby was bustling like a disturbed anthill—she had never seen it otherwise—and she noted with some satisfaction that a little group of people was clustered around the bulletin board near the bell-captain's desk, craning their necks at her handiwork. Those placards, she thought grimly, might be the only memorial that the four missing women would ever have.

She walked across the lobby, tingling at the thought that almost any one of the sleek, well-dressed men who went hurrying by might be Mr. Nemo himself, no doubt greenish-gray with worry behind the complacent mask she meant to strip away any day now, any moment.

The young man behind the desk—not Tad, but one somewhat higher on the ladder of assistant-managerships—told her that she was expected; she was to go right up to Mr. Brady's office. Even with full directions she had some difficulty in finding the unmarked door at the end of the mezzanine corridor, but on her tentative knock the latch clicked and Brady himself came to greet her. His smile was polite, almost painfully so, but there were dark shadows beneath his eyes.

"I understand that you've been having a little turmoil over here?" she asked brightly.

"To put it mildly, ma'am. Your methods are a little—startling. I wouldn't have given a plugged nickel for my job yesterday, but now I think the powers that be are a little calmer. It hasn't hurt business any, we're full up. And one thing, it stopped people complaining about the Sphinx club."

Miss Withers looked blank. "Haven't you been roped into one of those yet? It's a variation on the Pyramid clubs that went the rounds a while back, only it pays off quicker. Sort of a chain-letter gag without the letters. Somebody started one in the hotel and it got going like wildfire before we scotched it." Brady sat down at his desk. "Here's that phone bill."

There was no mistake. There for the month of August was the Grandee's account with the New York Telephone Company, and she read, circled in red ink: *Aug. 16. ... St Barb Cal Arroyo 184. ... \$22.25*

"That's the number I called," she confessed. "But it was only the Chamber of Commerce. And you can't tell me that Harriet Bascom committed suicide because of grapefruit!" She told him about the rest of it.

Brady shrugged. "Well, forgetting the Bascom thing for a moment, I'm more interested in the four others." He pointed to a great stack of looseleaf ledgers on his desk. "There are the hotel records for the last seven months. Buried in that heap is what information we have on the four women and their stay here, plus the records on all other guests. Some of them are in and out, but keep their suites. But we can tell when they were away because there won't be any room-service or telephone charges, valet service, and so on. I thought maybe if you and I went through it, and found that some male guest had been away for a few days about the time our missing women checked out—"

"Mr. Brady, I've misjudged you!" she cried.

"I told you we'd co-operate. Besides, it's the owners' orders. I get this thing cleared up in one week, or I get me another job."

"You too!" she said, sighing. "Well, let's get to work. Shall we start with Mr. Peter Temple?"

"I thought you'd eliminated him," Brady said, blankly surprised.

"I haven't eliminated anybody!" Miss Withers said grimly. Then they bent their heads over the ledgers, working in silence. It was the telephone which interrupted.

"Brady speaking—I thought I left orders—" Then his voice suddenly softened, and became as a cooing dove's. "Hello, J.K. Of course. Yes, we—certainly, J.K. Not yet, but—yes, J.K. Yes, right away."

The schoolteacher confidently expected him to hang up and then turn to her and say, "That was J.K.," as they used to do it in the old vaudeville skit. But Brady only grabbed his hat and coat. "Have to leave for a few minutes. You won't be disturbed here. Ring if you want anything." And he was gone.

An hour or so later, her head spinning from an effort to remember a dozen or so dates, suite numbers, and figures all at once, Miss Withers wearily pushed the ledgers aside. The masculine residents of the Grandee

seemed to have been as erratic as jack-rabbits in their comings and goings, but as far as she could see no one of them had been out of town for any appreciable length of time on the important days.

But how long need it take to commit a murder and dispose of a body? It might even have been done between sunset and sunrise—there were, she knew, lonely swamps and beaches even out on Long Island, thickly wooded parks and forest preserves only a few miles upstate, and even parts of Staten Island in the City itself where at this season of the year a body—or four bodies—might go undiscovered for months.

And there was always the tide, helped by the might of the Hudson, carrying so much of the waste of the city, its unwanted, out through the Narrows to the sea. . . .

She hastily scribbled a note of thanks to Mr. Brady and left it on the desk. Hurrying out through the lobby, she caught sight of a massive, rather hairy figure standing before the bulletin board, staring as if fascinated at the posters. Impulsively she turned and came up behind him.

“Count Stroganyeff!” she cried. “How nice to run into you again!”

The bulky Slav blinked at her warily. “I do not think—”

“Don’t you remember our meeting in the revolving door, and at the auction the other day?”

“Of course. Madame Goggins.” He bent over her hand, but this time to her faint disappointment he skipped the kiss.

“And how is the caviar business, and the Borzois?” she asked politely.

“Terrible. And getting worse. Anything Russian these days is a drag on the market—even Russian dressing. You would not be interested in a wolfhound puppy at a very great bargain?”

“I think not,” said the schoolteacher. “Wolfhounds are so sad. Perhaps now a poodle—do you think you could find me an apricot-colored Standard French poodle like the one you got for my friend Ethel Brinker?”

The blood drained from his face. “*Brinker?*” he whispered hoarsely. His eyes flashed to the pictured face on the poster, and back again. “*Her?*”

“Yes, that’s just what I meant.”

Stroganyeff smiled, with his thick lips only. “You are mistaken. I had no business dealings with Miss Brinker.”

It was time for a finesse. “But you were seen with her!”

“Perhaps—perhaps I suggest to her one day here in the hotel, very casually, that a wolfhound would be something to set off her looks, her charm. I say that to many people.”

“Then you admit that you knew her?”

“*Nyet!*” he exploded suddenly. “Are you the one who is responsible for this business with the posters? Are you the one that circulates a drawing that looks like me, and the description, so that my friends all avoid me?”

“If the shoe fits—” remarked Miss Withers.

“Bah!” Stroganyeff said, and went stalking off, muttering dark Russian curses.

Miss Withers realized that he had actually admitted nothing at all. She came closer, studying the drawing on the second poster very critically.

“Hmmm,” she said.

“Does look like him, doesn’t it?” Tad Belanger, in new tweed jacket and dark flannels, and obviously off duty, stood beside her.

“The Count? I can’t see it.”

“No, Jonathan himself. Portrait of the Artist.”

The schoolteacher stepped back and squinted critically. At first the idea seemed ridiculous. The features certainly didn’t match, but come to think of it there was something about the eyes, something mocking. . . .

“You are very discerning, young man,” she said.

“Am I?” He hesitated. “Er—how’s things?”

“She’s fine,” Miss Withers told him pointedly. “We’ve missed you.”

Thaddeus Belanger III looked suddenly flushed and sulky. “Oh, I’m afraid that Judge Davidson’s lovely daughter is a little high-nosed to miss anybody, and me least of all.”

“Really? I haven’t seen that side of her. Of course, far be it from me to try to give anyone advice, especially about affairs of the heart, but if you want my very candid, disinterested opinion. . . .”

He didn’t, but he got ten minutes of it anyway. Then Miss Withers abruptly left him and went hurrying down the Avenue. Men, she thought, were all alike—proud, stubborn, completely unreasonable creatures who were perpetually falling into a state of the sulks. And speaking of that, how was the Inspector today? With some temerity she stepped into a Lexington Avenue cigar store and dropped a coin into the pay phone.

“Oscar?” she said, almost expecting him to hang up on her.

She very nearly fainted with surprise when she was received with open arms and a hearty invitation to lunch. "But don't come here," Piper added hastily. "There's a little beanery around the corner. . . ."

Miss Withers, even before they had had a chance to order, sensed that there was a subtle change in the Inspector. But he only leaned back in the booth with a deep sigh and ordered corned beef and cabbage. "It's good to get away from those telephones," he told her. "Those flyers of yours have made it necessary to put on two extra men at the switchboards."

"Oscar! You mean we're getting results?"

"We got twenty-four calls yesterday and one hundred and seven this morning. A lot of 'em long-distance, collect."

"But that's wonderful!"

Piper showed a flash of his old spirit. "Wonderful, is it? Every nut in the country has been on the phone, trying to chisel in on the reward. A lady in Texas, with a Mexican accent you could cut with a knife, claims she's Mae Carter and wants me to wire her funds for a ticket to New York. Two or three more claim to be Emma Sue Atkins, please remit ditto. One old lady out in Omaha, who must be ninety, thinks that Alice Davidson was her missing twin sister, and a sailor just released from a veteran's hospital thinks maybe he married Ethel Brinker under another name four years ago in Frisco, just before he shipped out. A medium in Los Angeles claims she has talked to all four of the women in a séance—and so on and so on."

"Oh, dear." She looked at him cautiously. "Then why aren't you more annoyed than you are, Oscar? Are you by any chance coming around to my way of thinking?"

He shook his head. "Not about the four women. I think we'll hear from them. But about the Bascom case. I keep coming back to that. Remember the empty folder of traveler's checks in the hotel wastebasket? It was one of the things that made the boys who investigated the death so sure it was suicide because she was broke. Well, yesterday I got in touch with the ABA and had them look at their records. On the second day of August one of their member banks at Columbus Circle issued one thousand dollars worth of checks to Harriet Bascom, Hotel Barbizon, in denominations of fifty dollars. Of that amount exactly seven hundred dollars is still outstanding. And nobody who cashes a traveler's check holds it for eight months."

“So Mr. Nemo destroyed them! He couldn’t have cashed them without forging the duplicate signature on each one, so—”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” Piper said. “Anyway, I’m personally reopening the Bascom case, on the quiet. Of course, it’s a cold trail—”

“Not quite as cold as you think, Oscar. It was only last week, remember, that the nasty bleached blonde with the nastier dog dropped in at the auction and snatched Harriet Bascom’s luggage away from me. You suggested at the time that maybe she wanted the bags because the initials were the same as those of her husband, but those were women’s cases. I went scouting for Mrs. Herbert Baker and found that the address she gave would have been at the bottom of the Hudson River. On top of it all, when she sat beside me in the auction place she flashed a gold cigarette lighter, and the initials of the monogram didn’t have a *B* in them. I seem to remember something about an angle and a circle—such as *E.O.*.”

His eyes narrowed. “Lots of people give phony addresses and carry cigarette lighters they’ve picked up somewhere.”

“Yes, Oscar. But look at it this way. As I see it, Mr. Nemo knew that he had only a few minutes in Harriet’s hotel suite before the police would be there, even though he had closed the window to make it less easy to identify the room from outside. He set the stage as best he could, put on the gloomiest record he could find in Harriet’s collection, but he didn’t have time to go through all her luggage thoroughly. He must have had a suspicion that she had money hidden away, so he sent somebody to the auction to buy up everything that was hers. Only the woman missed the old valise that was off by itself, and I got it.”

“Not much to go on. The town is full of synthetic blondes with lap dogs.”

“Age about forty-five, weight one hundred sixty, height five feet six. A big loose smiling mouth, and mean, muddy eyes like tiny chips of glacier ice. Something gross and familiar in her manner, a way of calling people ‘dearie’ that sets your teeth on edge, and the look of having put on make-up and powder without washing first. She seemed—shopworn.”

“Hildegarde, you’re wonderful. Too bad you didn’t notice the taxi she hailed.”

“Stop trying to teach your grandmother to suck eggs. It was a new black and yellow Interborough.”

“Well, now! Cab companies have to keep trip tickets, and there’s just a faint chance, if I pull a few strings—”

“I already did—or rather, I pulled a twenty-dollar bill on the cab company dispatcher. That was the day after I found the woman had given a false address. They located the driver, but he had only taken the woman, bags and all, to Grand Central. The bird has flown.”

“An old trick. She went in and then out another entrance into a different cab, knowing that it’s impossible to trace hauls out of the terminal. You know, this blonde of yours sounds like a *wronggo*. People don’t usually switch over to the shady side of the law all at once. Maybe there’s something on her over in the files. With your description—”

“Oscar, what are you up to? Don’t get yourself into any more trouble.”

He grinned boyishly. “If I’m going to have a hearing and be accused of acting in excess of orders, infringing on the territory of another bureau, and otherwise gumming up the S.O.P. of the Department, I might as well give them something to chew on.” Piper rose suddenly. “Run along home. I’ll see you there later. And get ready to go calling this evening.”

The wiry little Irishman strode jauntily away, walking on his toes. “So Caesar is himself again!” observed the schoolteacher, much to the mystification of the waiter who hovered near by with the unpaid check.

It was nearly six o’clock when Inspector Piper finally showed up at her apartment, with a brown envelope under his arm and a new light in his eye. “Hey, what’s the matter?” he greeted her. “Did the dog eat up the steak again?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s nothing. I’m silly to let it upset me, but it was my great-grandmother’s table, and you can’t find soft velvety walnut like that any more. I wouldn’t mind it so much if the girl would admit that she did it, but of course she’s so emotionally snarled-up over that young man that she doesn’t know what she’s doing half the time.”

“Back up and start over,” Piper told her.

“Look!” and she showed him a blackened furrow on the edge of her dining-room table, where a cigarette had burned its entire length.

“Too bad,” he said. “Jeeps?”

“Who else? Talley chews, but he hasn’t taken up smoking yet!”

“Well,” said the Inspector, “maybe this will make you forget it. Want to look at some pretty pictures?”

They were starkly candid shots of half a dozen women who wore numbered cards instead of jewelry. There was a certain family resemblance between them all, but Miss Withers seized unhesitatingly on the third she looked at. “That is she!”

“Well, *her* happens to be one Flora alias Flower Quinn, a Jersey lily born in Hackensack in 1908, graduated from an industrial school for wayward girls in '24, worked awhile in various beauty parlors, got into the massage racket and finally ended up with a string of auto courts between here and Phillie. Up for transportation in May of 1945 but *nolle prossed*. She was also—”

“Oscar, I don’t understand.”

“She was barred from the Navy Yard, as the song goes. Those auto courts were equipped with hot and cold running hookers.”

“She was a Magdalene?”

“Spelled M-a-d-a-m. Anyway, our faded Flower dropped the racket after she beat that rap in '45, and presumably went legit.”

“Flower Quinn,” murmured Miss Withers. “Initials *F.Q.*—yes, those could have been what I saw on her lighter. Then she’s still using her own name.”

“Maybe. But she’s not listed in any phone directory in greater New York—I had the boys check down at Centre Street. But now that you’ve identified the photo I’ll order a sort of unofficial dragnet. Don’t worry—we’ll locate Flower Quinn in a day or so. And then”—he rubbed his hands together—“this case busts wide open.”

“I think, Oscar,” said Miss Withers, “that for once you’re right.”

The Inspector refused an invitation to dinner and went hurrying off. A little later Jeeps came in, loaded down with sandpaper, varnish, wax, and stain as well as a library book on refinishing furniture.

“Never mind that, child,” said Miss Withers. “I’m thinking.”

“What about? Can I help think?”

The young face was so hopeful, so eager to make amends, that the schoolteacher relented, and told her about Flower née Flora Quinn.

“But what can we or anybody do until the police locate her?” Jeeps wanted to know.

“I don’t quite know—but I’m going to do it. In this case all trails keep leading back to the Grandee. And Madam Quinn started off in life as a beautician. Give me that phone.” Hastily she dialed the number of the Grandee and demanded to be connected with the Cathedral de Beauté. “Hello! I’d like to make an appointment for a hairdo and a massage, please. Yes, tomorrow—and I’d like the same girl I had last time, Flora. What?” Miss Withers held a hand over the mouthpiece and said over her shoulder, “Hasn’t worked there since October.”

Then into the phone: “Well, could you give me her home address? I—I owe her something.” Another long pause. “Well, I don’t care what your policy is, I want that address. Do I have to call my friend Mr. Max Brady and—Very well. Thank you. I’ll call later about the appointment.”

She hung up. “Get it?” Jeeps begged.

“Got it. Alta Apartments, on Barrow Street in the Village. Wait until I tell the Inspector that! Him and his police dragnets!”

But the Inspector’s line was busy, and stayed busy. Finally Miss Withers gave it up and dished out a sketchy dinner for the three of them. But only Talleyrand had a satisfactory appetite.

After the dessert she tried again, and finally got through to Probationer Fink, who announced in somewhat strained tones that the Inspector was on a long-distance call and that three others were waiting for him. “Any message?”

“Just tell him that Miss Withers is going to go picking flowers,” the schoolteacher said. “He’ll understand.”

That was one night when the dinner dishes were left unstacked on the table. Miss Withers and Jeeps went tearing downtown in state, with Talley sitting between them in the rear of the taxi and trying his best to bark at passing traffic out of both windows at once.

The building, when they finally found it, was a narrow, dingy four-story, standing a little askew in the no-man’s-land where the Village merges into the lower west-side water front. A single bulb, festooned with last year’s cobwebs, burned in the lower hall, and Jeeps had to use a pocket-flash to squint at the half-obliterated names on the eight mailboxes. But Miss Withers and Talley were already hurrying up the stairs. “Don’t you hear it, child?”

From somewhere high above them came a feeble, irritable knife blade of sound. They raced to the top floor three abreast, where the two women hesitated. But Talley tightened his leash, pointing with his whiskery nose in the direction of the door at the rear of the hall. The faint animal noise was a little louder now, but there was a hoarse, gasping note in it. Miss Withers rapped sharply. "She must be out," Jeeps deduced. "No light shows through the transom."

But the schoolteacher shook her head. "Something's wrong. That dog in there has been barking and howling until it's almost lost its voice." She rattled the knob again.

"There must be a manager somewhere," the girl said. "But it wasn't marked on any of the bells down in the lobby."

"We haven't time for that." Miss Withers squatted down and tried a hairpin on the lock. Then from her handbag she took a knife blade and a strip of celluloid, equally without result. "These Yale locks," she murmured.

Beside them Talleyrand was whining, evidently made uneasy by the noise of the dog inside—or something. The schoolteacher stood up. "Young woman, have you ever read *Oliver Twist*?" She was looking thoughtfully at the half-open transom.

"Why, yes." Jeeps suddenly gasped. "But you don't think I'm going through that little-bitty thing, do you?"

"Not you. Come here, Talley." Jeeps watched, bug-eyed, as Miss Withers started to hoist the bewildered poodle up into the air. Then she caught hold, and together they shoved poor Talleyrand ignominiously through the transom into the room. They heard the soft clump as he hit the floor.

The schoolteacher leaned close to the panel. "Talley? Come, boy! Come here to me. Here Talley, here Talley."

There was the sound of bewildered whining inside. "Come on, Talley!" Miss Withers tried to whistle.

Then they heard the click of the dog's claws on the floor as he trotted away. There was a pause, and then the scrabble of running feet, a grunt—and suddenly two paws and a bewhiskered apricot face showed briefly in the transom opening. Talley hung there for a moment, and then dropped back. He barked hopefully.

“Not that way!” his mistress said. She rattled the knob. “Come on, Talley boy, come on out!”

“Maybe it’s bolted,” Jeeps whispered. “Aren’t you asking a good deal?”

“Talley, come here!”

There was a pause, a brief yip of excitement, and then the grating sound of ivory teeth on the knob. The two women waited, not even daring to breathe—and then the door opened. Talleyrand came proudly out, pausing like an acrobat for his bow and his applause. But his audience had pushed past him, into the darkened room.

“I’m medium scared,” Jeeps announced.

The air was stifling and stale, and Miss Withers’s analytical nose decided that there were traces of dog, food, chocolate, perfume, dust, and tobacco, among other smells.

“Look!” Jeeps cried, and grabbed her arm. In the darkness two reddish eyes gleamed fiercely. Then there was another outburst of hoarse, wheezing barks.

“It’s only her dog,” Miss Withers whispered. Then she found the light switch. They were standing in the midst of a big square room filled with furniture which was either Louis Quinze or Balaban and Katz, she couldn’t decide. Anyway there was a good deal of gilt. It appeared that a minor cyclone had passed through here some time ago, leaving a good deal of feminine wearing apparel in its wake.

From beneath a love-seat the rat-like Chihuahua glared at them, and then finally flung defiance to Talley in a yapping attack. Obviously deeply regretting the inflexible tradition that male dogs shall not chew up female dogs, the poodle retreated with lofty dignity and then suddenly leaped to the eminence of a large radio-phonograph, where he pretended to look for a flea.

“Look at that dog,” the schoolteacher said. “The poor little thing is shaking. Come here, Sugar.”

But Sugar retreated, snarling, under the love-seat again. The two women went on into the bedroom, where by the look of things two cyclones and a tornado had had a free-for-all. Stockings, underwear, slips, girdles, and dresses covered the rococo bed and every other available piece of furniture. The bed was unmade, and dingy peach-colored silk sheets and a

satin coverlet were wadded into a heap. In the closet, stacked almost to the ceiling, were five pieces of luggage marked *H.B.* in gold. They were empty, but the rest of the space was crowded with smart new suits and dresses—the wardrobe that had been poor Harriet Bascom's. It was the right place, and the right Flower Quinn.

“Suppose she comes back and catches us?” Jeeps wanted to know. “Do we tell her believe it or not we were waiting for a streetcar?”

The schoolteacher, who had been poking idly through the drawers of the vanity chest, looked up and said softly, “We might ask her what she was doing with these little toys.” She showed a battered leather jewel-case which she had ruthlessly pried open with a nail-file. In it were a small pearl-handled .38 automatic, a loaded leather sap, and a small square box almost full of white powders individually wrapped. “You are getting a glimpse of the seamy side of life,” Miss Withers told the girl. “That's the way chloral hydrate comes. It's knockout drops—the Inspector showed me some once in his office.”

“Nice people,” Jeeps said. “If—if you hear any odd sounds, it's just my teeth chattering.”

But Miss Withers said that wild horses couldn't drag her away before she had found out everything there was to find about Flower Quinn. And so far they had found nothing to prove her suspicion that the woman had been a tool of Mr. Nemo. She still might have wandered into that auction by accident, for all the proof anybody had.

The schoolteacher had always been of the opinion that it was the kitchen of a house that told most about its occupants. By that token, Miss Quinn ran true to form. The sink in the little kitchenette was piled with dirty dishes, some evidently of several days standing, and the cupboard shelves were a litter of half-emptied boxes and cans, strewed every which way. On the stove stood a full percolator and a frying pan containing bacon and three eggs half-cooked and now congealed in grease. There were four pieces of bread in the oven, faintly browned and now hard and cold.

Talleyrand still kept himself aloof on the radio-phonograph, but now the little Chihuahua sidled into the kitchenette, relaxing her suspicions enough to suggest that she would like to be fed. “That creature has gone hungry all day,” said Miss Withers, as she watched the spider-like beast

bury its nose in a plate of salmon. "The Quinn woman must have left in a tearing hurry."

"A good idea," Jeeps said. "Let's us, huh?"

"Perhaps you're right," the schoolteacher admitted. "It looks like a job for the Inspector from here on. Probably they'll assign a policeman to watch the place and pick her up when she comes home. She must intend to come home, or she wouldn't have left the dog." Miss Withers went around turning out lights. The place had been a disappointment—there was a dearth of real clues. No personal letters, no canceled checks, no little black book filled with telephone numbers. She picked up Talleyrand's dragging leash. "Very well, Jeeps. Look out and see if the coast is clear."

The girl cautiously opened the door and peered out into the hall. "All quiet," she said. Then suddenly she whipped back into the room, closing the door and leaning against it. "A man!" she whispered. "Coming up the stairs two steps at a time—I just caught a glimpse."

"Probably somebody for the front apartment."

But a heavy, brisk tread came down the hall.

"Into the kitchen!" whispered the schoolteacher, picking Talley up bodily in her arms. She turned out the living-room light. "Grab the little dog, quick!"

A key was already rattling in the lock as the two women huddled among the pots and pans, in pitchy darkness. The Chihuahua whined. "Hold its muzzle, child, so it won't betray us!"

The lock rattled again, as if the man with the key was not accustomed to it. Then suddenly it clicked, and there was the creak of the opening door. Surprisingly a low whistle sounded.

Miss Withers thought wistfully of the little gun hidden in the bedroom. Clutching the wriggling and uncomfortable poodle with one arm, she felt around behind her and found a potato masher.

The whistle sounded again, louder. Someone had taken a step or two into the living-room, but had not touched the light switch.

Suddenly Jeeps let go with a bloodcurdling scream. The poodle twisted out of Miss Withers's grasp, barking frantically. In trying to grab him she knocked down an avalanche of pots and pans, and then tripped over his leash and fell headlong. Somebody stepped on Talley's paw, and he yelped Bloody Murder. Then the front door slammed.

“It *bit* me!” Jeeps was moaning. Then she turned on the light. Talley had prudently retired under the sink. The girl’s thumb was streaming blood, and her face was white as paper and twisted with pain and remorse. “I didn’t mean to scream and spoil everything, but it bit me!”

Somehow Miss Withers scrambled to her feet and ran across the living-room, flung open the front door. Two flights down she could hear heavy running footsteps on the stairs, and then the slam of the front door. Somewhere an automobile motor roared, gears clashing.

The Chihuahua was gone.

When they got down to the street it was bare and deserted. In the soft, inch-deep snow along the curb a double line of automobile tires had curved in and out again—new tires, with deep, clear-cut diamond treads. But even as Miss Withers peered hopefully down at them great soft flakes of snow began to fall, blotting out the marks.

So near it had been.

*“Wandering between two worlds, one dead, The other powerless to be born. . . .”*

—Matthew Arnold

## 13

THAT NIGHT MISS HILDEGARDE WITHERS had the dream again, and must have been talking and moaning in her sleep, for Talleyrand finally worked at her bedroom door until he got it open and then trotted in to put his paws on the bed and nuzzle sympathetically at her face.

Her first impulse, once bathed and clothed and in her right mind, was to call the Inspector and tell him about the anticlimax of last evening. But on the other hand, there were parts of the story she would just as soon not discuss over the telephone, especially through the official switchboard. Perhaps just this once he wouldn't mind if she came down to the office.

She was halfway to the subway before she remembered that she had meant to have a look around her doorway. Had there been a man in a gray overcoat talking to the doorman of the apartment house down the street, or hadn't there? Anyway, it was too late to turn back now. She took the downtown subway and twenty minutes later marched a little diffidently into the Municipal Building.

Whatever reception Miss Withers had expected, there was a surprise waiting for her. The brawny Miss Fink looked up and waved her on. "Go right in—we were just trying to get you on the phone."

She burst into the office. "Oscar, what do you think—"

"What I think isn't fit for publication," he said. Behind the great mahogany desk the Inspector today somehow looked more like a sphinx than a leprechaun. Before him was a telegram, to which he pointed. "Read it. Read it and weep."

It was a collect straight message, filed at Miami, Florida, at eight-thirty that morning, addressed to the Inspector.

PLEASE IMMEDIATELY STOP SEARCH AND ALL PUBLICITY INVOLVING MY NAME. VERY EMBARRASSED. I AM VERY HAPPILY MARRIED AND FOR PERSONAL REASONS DO NOT WANT ANY CONTACT WITH PAST. MY HUSBAND IS TRYING TO AVOID BEING SERVED WITH PAPERS IN CIVIL SUIT. TO PROVE IDENTITY SUGGEST CONTACT MISS H M WITHERS 32 W 74TH ST AND ASK HER IF SHE REMEMBERS THE TIME TABBY AND TOWSER GOT OUT OF THE CAGE.

WHEN THE PRESENT SITUATION QUIETS DOWN WILL RETURN TO NEW YORK AND TAKE CARE OF THINGS. WILL ALSO COMMUNICATE WITH MY NIECE AND NAMESAKE ALICE D. IN BAGLEY'S MILLS PA. YOU WILL UNDERSTAND WHY I OMIT MARRIED NAME AND PRESENT TEMPORARY ADDRESS.

ALICE DAVIDSON

“Oh!” said Miss Withers, sinking suddenly into a chair.

“Well, what about it?”

“It—it must be genuine,” she said softly. “Because nobody else would know about the funny names Alice had for her love-birds. That was one of the things I wrote down in the black leather notebook where I keep the dossiers of the missing women.”

“Well, scratch Alice Davidson.” The Inspector shook his head. “It’s what I’ve said all along—that your four missing women were probably just breaking ties with the past and dropping out of sight for reasons of their own. But I did hope, up until now, that maybe I was wrong and you were right.”

She smiled wanly. “Thank you, Oscar. It—it’s worse than you think. We can scratch Ethel Brinker, too.” She took the letter from her handbag and handed it over to him together with the dog’s pedigree and registration papers.

“Two down and two to go.” Piper shook his head. “Maybe I better not even wait for the hearing before the board. Maybe I better quit right now and go looking for a job as night watchman.”

“Oscar,” she spoke up, “do you suppose there’s any chance that the signature on that letter could be forged? Suppose somebody got hold of the pedigree and the registration, and then traced or copied it?”

“No, and again no,” the Inspector told her. “You’re grabbing at straws. I’ve had enough experience with handwriting to tell you right now that the two Ethel Brinker signatures on the dog registration and the Ethel Brinker Brown signature on the letter were all written by the same hand, though they’re just different enough to prove they weren’t traced.”

“Oh!” and she subsided. “But there are still two other women that we haven’t heard from. And Harriet—you yourself were beginning to think yesterday that there was something very wrong about her death—the

window, and all the rest of it.” She plunged into a breathless recital of last night’s adventures downtown in the Village.

Piper shook his head. “So what does it add up to? Flower Quinn, a retired hookshop madam, worked for a while in the beauty shop at the Grandee. When she heard about the suicide she was just smart enough to remember that Miss Bascom had a nice new wardrobe, so she fished around and found out when the auction of the luggage was to take place, and bought the stuff. Yesterday something came up and she had to be away from home all day—so she sent some friend of hers with a key to stop in and take her dog out for a little exercise.”

“But, Oscar! The man ran away.”

“Who wouldn’t? No wonder he got out of there fast when he heard screams and all the commotion you made in the kitchenette. I think I would myself. Besides, any pal of Flower’s is probably the type character who doesn’t want to get mixed up in anything where the law might be involved.”

“You aren’t going to arrest the woman? After all, she had a gun and things hidden in her jewel case.”

“Yeah—and you had no legal right to be in the apartment. We can’t go in there without a search warrant, and we can’t get that on this kind of evidence. All I can do is to have Flower Quinn brought in for questioning, and she hasn’t broken any law in giving a false address and changing from one taxi to another in Grand Central.”

“Oh, dear. Perhaps you’re right—”

Then the Inspector turned to face the woman who stood in the doorway. “Yes, Fink? What is it now?”

“Will you accept a call from a Mrs. Carter, in Phoenix, Arizona? It’s collect.”

“Oh, sure, sure!” Then Piper waved his arm. “Put her on! I accept collect calls from everybody, anywhere!”

Miss Withers slumped in her chair. How she would have liked to hold both hands over her ears, or to rush out of the room! But these were her own chickens coming home to roost. This was the final result of her great project, on which she had expended so much time, effort, and money. The explosion she had counted on was going off with the feeble pop of a soap bubble.

“Yes, Piper speaking. What did you say your name was again, please? Mae Carter, Mae with an *e*. Okay.” There was a considerable pause. “Now, Mrs. Carter, don’t take it like that. It was only—” Another pause. “Why, some of your friends here were worried about you, and feared you might have met with foul play. Yes, I see. Of course. Just a minute—hold the line, please.”

He put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to the schoolteacher. “She says that after she won that radio jackpot and all the prizes she was so pestered with begging calls and letters that she was almost out of her mind. Even after she came to New York people were still trying to horn in on the bonanza. She married and went out west, and now she’s not only afraid that those confounded posters will start the commotion all over again, but that her husband’s people and her new friends will get wise to the fact that she really isn’t a woman of means, she’s just a nobody who had a bit of luck.”

But the schoolteacher was on her feet. “Wait, Oscar! It all sounds very glib and convincing, but just ask her to prove she’s the real Mae Carter. Ask her to describe the purchase she left at Altman’s for alterations and never picked up. And ask her what was the amount of her deposit account at Macy’s!”

“Why not?” He turned to the phone again, while Miss Withers waited with her fingers crossed, hardly daring to breathe. In a moment he looked up and announced, “She says it was a beige wool suit with peplum jacket and knife-pleated skirt. She left it because she changed her mind. And she says she has one hundred and eighty-five dollars in her deposit account at Macy’s and thanks for reminding her.”

There was a long silence. “Well?” Piper demanded.

The schoolteacher nodded. “Scratch Mae Carter,” she said in a small sad voice.

And he hung up. “That’s that.”

The two ancient antagonists stared at each other. Miss Withers spoke first. “There’s still one left—Emma Sue Atkins,” she said without much conviction.

Piper snorted. “Would you like to bet an old Dewey button against a new hat that we don’t hear from her too before the week is out?”

She didn’t take the bet. What would she want with a new hat anyhow? She was going to be wearing sackcloth and ashes from now on. And it was

only five days until the Inspector's hearing, when he was going to be dragged up before the board to answer for her sins. Suddenly it was impossible for her to sit here and look at the man. So far he had avoided actually saying, "I told you so!" but he positively radiated it.

She started toward the door. "Oscar, I—I'll be at home if you should want me for anything."

"Good-by—*please!*" Oscar Piper said fervently.

Wearily she dragged herself back uptown. There were two men sitting in a small maroon coupé a little way up the street from her door, but she was too despondent even to care.

Talleyrand tactfully tried to shake her out of the dumps by putting on his entire repertoire of tricks—playing dead, sitting up, walking on his hind legs, and tossing his rubber ball up into the air and catching it again. But he was for once playing to an unresponsive audience.

*It is always darkest just before the dawn*, Miss Withers reminded herself. *And also, when it is darkest you can see the stars*. But she could see no stars anywhere, nor any glimmer of light in the enfolding gloom. Jeeps Davidson came home from the nursery school a little after noon, but for once she was in a mood that quite matched Miss Withers's own.

"I decided this morning that I've been very silly," she announced gravely. "I thought it all over and then called up Tad."

"Very sensible of you, child."

"I called him four times," Jeeps confessed.

"And he wouldn't talk to you?"

"He wasn't there. He wasn't working, and he wasn't upstairs in his little room on the top floor where the bellboys and assistant-managers sleep. He's gone."

"Gone? Gone where?"

The girl shook her head. "All I could find out was that yesterday he just got in his car and left. You don't look very surprised!"

"Nothing," said Miss Hildegarde Withers, "could surprise me now." And she told the girl about the events of the morning—the telephone call and the letter. "So you see, your aunt says she is happily married and that she will communicate with you sometime later."

"Gosh!" said Jeeps. "That—that rather ties it, doesn't it?"

The schoolteacher nodded. "It does indeed. I suppose it's un-Christian to be disappointed because somebody isn't dead. But I feel as the husky-driver must have felt who mashed his sled-dogs over a thousand miles of Arctic waste to carry the antitoxin to Nome and then found that there wasn't any epidemic there after all."

"There—there couldn't be any mistake, could there?"

Miss Withers took the black looseleaf notebook from its hiding-place behind the bookcase. "Nobody but your aunt would know that she used to have a pair of lovebirds named after a cat and dog because they always fought. Nobody but Mae Carter would know all about that suit she left at Altman's, and about the account at Macy's. Nobody but Ethel Brinker would have had Talley's papers and could have signed that letter. See? It's all down here, in black and white."

"And you're in the red!"

The schoolteacher nodded. "But not as badly as I would have been if anyone had claimed the reward, as they had a perfect right to do. But they all had reasons for wanting it hushed up."

Jeeps said, "I just will have to get used to the idea of Auntie being alive all over again. I—I can't really believe it yet." She looked hard and long at the poster pinned to the wall—the four faces. "Anyway, there's still the Atkins woman."

"Wait and see," said Miss Withers. "When troubles come, they come not singly, but in bucketsful."

The phone rang at five o'clock. "Inspector Piper is calling you, just a minute please."

"Yes, Oscar?" Hope sprang eternal in Miss Withers's breast. "Have your men picked up Flower Quinn?"

"What? Oh, no. Nothing like that. Nobody home. She must have got wind of something and ducked out. What I called about—well, just for the record—"

"Go on. I can take it."

"Well, a woman who claims to be Mrs. Emma Sue Atkins is on the other phone calling from Sun Valley, Idaho—collect of course."

"Yes, Oscar?"

"The same story, almost. It seems that she is very embarrassed at all the fanfare and will we please call off the dogs? She's married, but her

husband's interlocutory decree isn't final and she's afraid his first wife will make trouble. Sounds genuine all right, but just to button it up tight, have you got anything I can ask her, so we'll know she isn't another nut?"

After a quick reference to the notebook, Miss Withers made a couple of suggestions, completely without hope. "Call you back," the Inspector said.

Jeeps and Miss Withers sat like wooden images, waiting. Then the phone rang again. "Scratch Atkins," Piper told her bluntly. "It's her all right. The connection wasn't very good, and her voice sounded sort of mushy—"

"Was it a southern accent? She was from Baltimore."

"Maybe so. Anyway, she says she's going to pay that fifty-dollar pledge she made to the Red Cross one of these days—she just hasn't got around to it. And she eloped in such a hurry she didn't bother to close out the bank account at the Fifth Avenue Trust and Savings, but she'll write to them. She didn't say as much, but I gathered that one of the reasons she's trying to stay anonymous is that she's afraid the income-tax people will try to take a big bite out of the settlement she got from the cab company, or else she hasn't paid her lawyer. So—"

"Miami, Phoenix, and Sun Valley, all heard from in one day. And Santa Barbara a couple of days ago."

"There go your four missing women," Piper reminded her unnecessarily. "Everybody heard from but the dream man on the other poster. Shall I stick around and see if Mr. Nemo calls up too?"

"No, Oscar. Don't rub it in. I'd ask you over for dinner, but we're having crow tonight, with a side order of humble pie."

"Hmmmph! I've got to sit down now to the pleasant job of making a full report to my superiors on this rat-race. It'll sound good at the hearing. Might as well have an accused man write out the brief for the prosecuting attorney."

"Must you, Oscar? Report it, I mean?"

"Of course. The calls came through the official switch board, and Fink knows all about 'em. The story's all through the Department already. You can hear Dan Kiley laughing and sharpening his ax all the way down the hall."

There was nothing Miss Withers could say but "Good-by," so she said it and hung up.

"Joan of Arc, was I?" she told Jeeps. "Don Quixote, rather. And Mr. Nemo was only a windmill."

The girl looked worried. "Are you—quite all right?"

"I was the little boy who cried 'wolf' in the story. I was Horatius, chopping down the wrong bridge. I was the football player in the Rose Bowl who grabbed the ball and galloped ninety yards to make a touchdown for the other team. I—"

But Jeeps led her into the bedroom. "You're going to take an aspirin and lie down!" A little later the girl sat on the edge of the bed. "Feeling better?"

"What do you think?"

"Maybe I shouldn't leave you alone, then."

"Leave me? Are you going out?"

"Home," Jeeps said. "Where else?"

"Of course, of course."

"I feel just as badly about it as you do," the girl continued. "But there isn't anything to keep me here now. The quest is finished and done with. And if Tad had cared anything about me at all he wouldn't have just disappeared without saying a word."

"I don't know—"

"I do. I'm going back home to Bagley's Mills and forget about him. There are just as good fish in the sea as ever were caught, and some of them aren't born liars—or worse. I'll hide my broken heart behind a smile and be the *femme fatale* of the soft-coal country."

"Tell me, child. Is there a boy back home?"

"Several. The best ones got away years ago and went to the city, but there's the boy who dishes sodas in the Bon Ton, and the one who works for the milk company. The competition's tough, though—I have twelve sisters, you know, and four of them getting to the predatory age."

"It doesn't exactly sound idyllic."

"It'll be a good place to lick my wounds. Men! You can have them!"

The schoolteacher shook her head. "There's only one I ever cared anything about, and I've jinxed him forever and ever. Oscar Piper will never speak to me again, and I can't say that I blame him!"

Jeeps said she guessed she'd run out and get a dress she'd left at the cleaners, go up and make her apologies to the woman who ran the nursery school, and pick up the rest of the odds and ends.

"Go ahead, child. I'll try to take a nap."

As she drifted off she felt the lurch of the bed as the poodle, intrigued by the idea of anyone taking a daytime nap, leaped onto the bed and lay down at her feet. Then surprisingly, now that all hope was lost, she slept—murmuring to herself something about, "Sleep that knits the raveled sleeve of care."

To wake suddenly, with a terrible silent scream. The dream had come again, and this time she had gone down under the weight of the maddened beasts who hemmed her in. She lay choking. . . .

It was only Talley, who had crept up on the coverlet and then rolled over so that one careless outflung paw was across her face.

"Down, you silly fool!" she cried in her classroom voice. Brown eyes saddened with puzzled reproach, the poodle slid reluctantly off the bed. Then she sat up suddenly. It was almost dark, but the stars were shining—one star, anyway.

"Mad dogs! Of course! My subconscious wasn't very subtle, after all." Hastily the schoolteacher flung on a dress, paused only to put Talley's long-awaited dinner in his pan and give him a forgiving pat, and then seized coat and hat and rushed out of the apartment.

Fast as a taxi could take her she hurried to her old stamping-ground in the periodical reading-room of the public library at Fifth and Forty-Second. Feverishly she went through the out-of-town papers for November, eliminating city after city as she went. Nothing in Los Angeles. Nothing in San Francisco. Nothing in Philadelphia, or Boston, or Chicago, or Seattle.

...

Finally she bumped her head against a stone wall. Then she cried, "Of course!" so loudly that several of the musty little old men who haunt the place glared at her. But she didn't care. Naturally, a woman who was planning a trip wouldn't send on ahead for copies of the local papers. Most cities, especially those depending on tourist trade, minimized news of such things anyway. If Ethel Brinker had seen in some newspaper that there was a rabies epidemic where she was going—as she had told Harris when she

turned Talleyrand over to him for board—then she must have read it in some New York daily!

And there it was, in *The Times* for November 14th—two days before Ethel had called the boarding-kennel. Under an AP dateline, the schoolteacher read: *Rabies Scare Hits Miami Beach—Order Compulsory Pet Inoculations.*

Now she knew where Ethel Brinker had gone—or rather, where the poor woman had thought she was going. And it was a long way from Santa Barbara.

More bits and pieces for the patchwork—and it wasn't going to have to be a crazy-quilt, either. A harmony of shapes and colors, a patterned design, was beginning to form. It just needed stitching together, and one big scrap for the middle.

What was it that Jonathan had said, about cats mewing at any door when winter was coming on? To be warm—and secure—the bait hadn't been glamour but coziness. . . .

An hour later, with fumbling, excited fingers Miss Withers dropped a coin into a pay-phone and dialed Spring 7-3100.

“Extension 36—Inspector Piper. And hurry.”

But she heard only the policewoman's flat Brooklyn accents.  
“Probationer Fink speakin'. He's not in his office.”

“Oh, dear!” The schoolteacher frowned. There was so much she had to tell him, and yet it had to be couched so that the real message would be for his ears alone. “Will you take a message, please? I'm afraid it will be quite a long one, so take your notebook.”

“Okay, shoot,” said Fink wearily.

“Just tell him that everything is going to be all right because I had the same dream four times running and finally it dawned on me what it meant. Ethel Brinker isn't Ethel Brinker at all, she isn't even alive—”

“A little slower, please.”

“Very well. Tell him I went over to the Kennel Club and found out that they send out blank pedigrees and application blanks for registration to anybody who writes in for them. And it wasn't the Pillicoc signature on the papers—”

“Howdja spell that?”

“Never mind. And of course a registered nurse doesn’t put the initials RN after her name when she signs a letter, particularly not when she signs her married name. And if the Brinker thing falls to pieces, they all fall. And I think I see how Mr. Nemo worked it.”

“What’s that name?”

“Nemo—it means ‘Nobody’ in Latin. Tell the Inspector that there’s been a traitor in my own camp, I’ve been nursing a viper to my bosom, and my little black book was opened to the enemy.”

“Is that all?” Miss Fink said, in a very odd tone indeed.

“All for now. Oh, you might add this. Pick up Flower tomorrow, especially if she has false teeth. Have you got that?”

“I’ll give your message to the Inspector,” said Fink, and hung up. The policewoman shook her head. “Now who’da thought that a respectable old coot like her would get hopped to the gills on marihuana?”

But after she had transcribed her notes, she corrected herself. “Heroin, more likely.”

Down the hall Inspector Oscar Piper was sitting uncomfortably in the Commissioner’s office, with the Old Man behind the desk, Kiley standing beside him, and Rawlinson, the police surgeon, across the room. “You’ve read the report,” Piper was saying. “It wasn’t until I had finished that I realized the deadly similarities between the four cases. Poor Miss Withers was wrong about the four women being murdered, but she blundered into a clear case of bigamy. They all married the same man—he gave each of them a variation of the same cock-and-bull story about the reasons why they weren’t to communicate with friends or relatives. With plane travel what it is today, he’s probably jumping back and forth, keeping them all happy—”

Dan Kiley made a rude noise.

“There have been cases like that,” the Old Man put in. “I remember fourteen years ago out in Chicago—” It was a long story, but it finally came to an end. “He got ten years, and all five of his wives said they’d wait for him. What-a-man Hinkle, we called him.”

“Then you see why I want police protection for Hildegarde Withers,” the Inspector said. “Because she uncovered this thing and will keep on digging. The smart guy who married those four women he met in the Hotel

Grandee last fall very possibly pushed Harriet Bascom out of a hotel window there last summer. He may or may not be intending to knock off the four wives when their money runs out, but it's almost a cinch that he'll come roaring back to New York and try to quiet Miss Withers. The Department hasn't shown up too well in this whole thing, and that's largely my fault. But if it all winds up with the murder of a well-meaning private citizen who's only, after all, been trying to do our work for us—"

The Old Man shifted uneasily and coughed behind his hand. "I see your point, Piper. But what we asked you to step in here about—"

There was an interruption then, as Fink appeared suddenly in the doorway with the typed telephone message in her hand. "For you, Inspector. Miss Withers said it was very urgent." She was smiling, very smugly.

"I think I'll take that," Dan Kiley spoke up suddenly. He read the message to himself, and then again aloud. "So it's dreams, and pollywogs, and vipers in her bosom, and enemies." He turned to Rawlinson. "Doctor, don't you agree with me that this is up your alley?"

"Wait a minute!" the Inspector started to say.

"That's not all," Kiley put in. "We have a copy of another telephone message from the same party, that came in last night. Your friend Miss Withers informed you that she was going out picking flowers. In February!"

"If you'll just shut up and listen a minute, Mr. Kiley—"

"And we happen to know that a little while ago you received a telephone call from a young woman who acts as companion to Miss Withers. She said that she was worried, because the woman was talking wildly about not being Joan of Arc any more, she had switched to being Don Quixote, and also she thinks she's a football player and Horatius at the wrong bridge."

"Wire-tapping, eh?" Piper suddenly stood up.

"At my orders," Kiley told him. "I thought it was time we found out about what was going on. It's pretty clear, isn't it?"

"Listen! This is ridiculous. If any of you knew the old girl like I do—" The Inspector waved his hand. "If you understood—"

"We understand better than you think," said Dr. Rawlinson. "Offhand I'd say it's a fairly clear case of dementia praecox with delusions of persecution. She talks about enemies that are after her little black book. For

her own sake I recommend that Miss Withers be sent over to Bellevue for observation."

"That would take care of your worry about her personal safety, wouldn't it?" put in the Old Man. "You see, Piper, whether they find anything basically wrong with her or not, she'd be safe there."

The Inspector took out a cigar, thoughtfully broke it up into inch lengths, and put it into the ash tray. "I don't know what to say. The woman's as sane as I am. This whole thing—"

Then the phone rang. The Old Man answered it, and then said, "It seems to be for you, Inspector."

"Piper speaking."

The clear, Bostonian accents were loud enough so that they could all hear every word Miss Withers said, clustering closer as they were: "Oscar, did you get my message? Isn't it wonderful? I only have a minute, so listen carefully. Tell Jeeps to take Talley with her to Bagley's Mills for a few days. I'm flying, but dogs can't fly!"

"Wait—" But the connection was broken, and so, apparently, was the Inspector. He hung up automatically and then stood there for a moment, his shoulders slumping.

"Dogs can't fly," said Kiley softly. "But *she* can. Doctor, I think this cinches it. We're all agreed that this lady's wings will have to be clipped so that a straitjacket will fit over them."

Even the Old Man nodded. Piper turned to face him. "Then sure and is there any reason why I can't be relieved of duty, as of now?"

"Of course not, but—"

Even now the assistant-commissioner had to butt in. "Until the hearing Tuesday, you mean. You'll be there?"

"*You* be there!" the Inspector growled. His Irish was up. "Because, faith and when it's over and I turn in the badge I've worn for—for too many years, I'm going to take you outside and so help me, I'm going to *lower the boom!*"

*“There’s a bat or two in every belfry.”*

—Yankee proverb

## 14

THE WRONG ALICE HAD HER suitcase packed and waiting by the door. It was nearly midnight, but the girl still sat perched in a big chair in Miss Withers's little living-room, as stiff and proper and bewildered as a child at a funeral. Talley the poodle sat pressing against her shin for comfort, sensing that something was wrong with his world.

"But there must be something we can do!" Jeeps said, for the dozenth time.

The Inspector, who had been pacing up and down the room gnawing cigars, suddenly stopped and faced her. "Sure there is. You can take the dog, like she asked me to tell you, and go back home to wherever it is. You'll do her no good here, and neither will the pup."

"But to think of her wandering around somewhere, in her condition—"  
"Her *what*?"

"Oh," the girl said hastily, "I don't mean that I think there was anything the least wrong with her mind. I'd sort of got used to the way she talks—you know, sometimes in a sort of shorthand, and with a lot of poetic allusions and stuff. It was me, I mean, I who called her Joan of Arc—"

"I know what you mean," Piper said dryly. "Joan of Arc crossed with Carrie Nation, and a dash of Evangeline Booth."

"But she was terribly discouraged, mostly because she'd got you into so much trouble. When sensitive people get gloomy and morbid—"

"Pish! I've known Hildegarde Withers for sixteen years, and she's no more morbid than a—a canary bird. She wouldn't contemplate taking her own life under any set of circumstances whatever. And besides, she wasn't gloomy when she phoned my office, either time. She was riding high—so happy and excited that she bubbled over. She must have found out something, or else at least thought she saw the answer. Of course she sounded incoherent to anybody who didn't know her."

"Could I see the message she left for you?"

Piper hesitated. "Haven't got it with me," he lied. "Anyway, it didn't say much that made sense even to me. Of course Fink probably garbled it up some in transcribing her own notes. She has the mind of a gnat. All I

made out of it was that Hildegarde knew Ethel Brinker was dead, and if she was dead then so were the other three—dead as mutton. Oh, it's your aunt, isn't it? I'm sorry."

Jeeps said, surprisingly, "I know my aunt is dead. I've known it for weeks. Besides, she wouldn't have written a telegram like that. 'My niece and namesake Alice D.' phooey! She'd have called me *Allie*."

"Some people freeze up when they write a telegram."

"Maybe! But on top of that, my aunt never sent a collect telegram to anybody in her life! She was too—too polite. And there wasn't a mean streak in her, about money or anything else."

The Inspector nodded. He looked at his watch. "What time is the last train?"

"Twelve-thirty. It gets me in in the morning."

"Take it," he ordered. "You and the pup. I'll handle things at this end, and let you know. There's nothing much either one of us can do. She'll be picked up and taken over to Bellevue whenever she pokes her face out in the street."

Jeeps got up and started to put on her coat. "Okay. Only—I do hope they'll be gentle with her."

"I hope she'll be gentle with them! Any psychiatrist trying to poke around in Hildegarde Withers's mind is going to have his ears pinned back flat. It'll probably be like the night she spent in the station-house tank—she'll be leading them in community singing." But there was almost too much confidence in his voice.

"But if something's happened to her—"

He almost smiled. "Things don't happen to Hildegarde, she happens to them. But I'll try to take care of that end of it. Scoot now." He picked up her bag. "I'll take this down to a taxi for you."

"But you're going to stay here all night?"

"Yes. She might come back, and the Old Man said I could break it to her. And if they pick her up, they'll phone me here. When she—when she's safe."

"Oh, that's just swell, isn't it?" The girl snapped the leash on the puzzled poodle's collar and ran lightly down the stairs. But when the Inspector put her into the taxi he saw that her cheeks were wet.

He said to himself, as he went wearily back up the stairs, *If that girl played traitor to Hildegarde in any way I'll march in the next St. Patrick's Day parade with an orange ribbon in my buttonhole.*

Oscar Piper took off his shoes and sat down in the big chair near the silent telephone. After a while his head slipped back and he slept fitfully, waking up in the morning as stiff as a board.

He stood up, rubbed his aching muscles, and then washed himself and warmed up some stale coffee. Before he drank it he called Bellevue and then Headquarters, but there was nothing to report.

For Hildegarde Withers to vanish, with every cop in New York looking for her, was a manifest impossibility. With the clothes she wore, the cotton umbrella, and the voluminous handbag—and the hat—she must stand out, wherever she was, like a hawk in a henyard. He checked her bedroom closet and decided that the bonnet she had gone out in had been the one that looked like a bon-voyage basket ten hours after sailing time.

Her blue cape was gone, but he didn't know enough about the rest of her clothes to do any guessing. Likewise about the money—Jeeps had said that sometimes she kept it in the bottom of a double boiler in the cupboard and sometimes under the folded newspapers in the bottom of the garbage can in the kitchen, but both were empty. Her toothbrush was in its proper place in the bathroom, but she very well might have had a spare.

The Inspector wandered back into the dining-room and sat down at the table with the famous black notebook before him and another cup of bitter second-run coffee at his side. Too many people had been vanishing, at least for his taste. Not three thousand, as Hildegarde had argued in the beginning, but still too many. Besides the four whose messages had been so oddly unsatisfactory, there was Tad Belanger at the Grandee, Flower Quinn from down in Greenwich Village. And now Miss Withers herself.

Probably the answers were all here in the notebook, somewhere. Because the old girl was thorough in her way. He read through the dossiers on the four women, the notes on Harriet Bascom, and Miss Withers's penciled impressions of the various men whom at one time or another she had suspected of being Mr. Nemo—or at least of knowing something about his activities. Peter Temple, Count Stroganyeff, Jonathan the artist, Jerry Forrest, and the rest—Piper suddenly wished that he had them all in the back room at some precinct station where he could beat the truth out of

them with a rubber hose and the toe of his boot. But those days were gone forever.

Today the Department put its faith in gadgets—in lie-detector tests and truth serums and laboratory tests and wire-tapping devices. Hardly anybody even walked a beat any more, and when they did call on the few remaining mounted units, the horses and men were rushed to the scene in a van. They even had three planes and a Bell D-47 helicopter out in Brooklyn. . . .

*I'm going about this thing the wrong way, the Inspector told himself angrily. I'm thinking like a cop, and if eighteen thousand cops haven't found Hildegarde yet, then I'm not going to either. What would she do, now?*

There was the old saw about the yokel who could always find lost cows because he thought where he would go if he was a cow and he went there and there she was. But Piper found himself completely unable to put himself in the state of mind of a spinster schoolteacher with a bee in her bonnet and a pocketful of money. Hildegarde was as unpredictable as the weather. He took out Fink's transcription of the telephone message and read it over carefully:

*Tell him everything is going to be all right because I had the same dream four times running and finally it dawned on me what it meant. Ethel Brinker isn't Ethel Brinker at all, she isn't even alive. I went over to the Canal Club and found that they send out blank filigrees and blanks to anybody who writes in. And it wasn't the pollywog's signature on the papers. Of course a registered nurse doesn't put aren't after her name when she signs a letter, particularly not when she signs her married name. If the Brinker thing falls to pieces they all fall. And I think I see how Nobody worked it. There's been a traitor in my own camp, I've been nursing a viper to my bosom, and my little black book was opened to the enemy. Pick a flower tomorrow especially if it has false teeth.*

Inspector Piper sighed. He had already checked, and there wasn't a night spot or any other place in town known as the "Canal Club." But the rest, except for bits here and there, was gibberish.

It wouldn't have looked so bad if it hadn't been for the other phone call, when Hildegarde had announced that she was flying, but that dogs

can't fly. There was no getting around that.

Finally Piper gave it up and walked across town to his own home. He needed a bath and a shave, but more than that he needed a new brain. The old one was very definitely getting rusty.

*“And he that stands upon a slippery place  
Makes nice of no vile hold to stay him up.”*

—Shakespeare

## 15

IT WAS LATE IN THE AFTERNOON WHEN the Inspector, weary with fruitless checking of hospitals and morgues, put down the phone and fared forth into the wind and storm. Anything at all was better than inaction. From force of habit he took the subway down to what had been, until yesterday, his office. After all, he had a box of cigars and a lot of other personal stuff in the desk.

Probationer Fink followed him into the inner office. No, there was nothing new on Miss Hildegarde Withers. She had dropped out of sight as a stone drops into the water, only not even a ripple remained. Her disappearance was total and complete, though every policeman in greater New York was supposed to be looking for her.

“No messages?” he demanded.

“No personal ones,” the woman said. “Mr. Kiley’s orders were that anything official was to be referred to him or to Captain Gruber over at Homicide.”

Piper demonstrated to her that he still carried his gold badge. “Come clean, Fink. What came in?”

“Well, there were two telegrams,” she admitted reluctantly. “And a couple of phone calls. But it’s just stuff for the *Nut* file, like the rest of the stuff that poured in after those *Wanted* flyers went out. Captain Gruber said that it wasn’t important.”

“Give!” he said. “That’s an order, too.”

The first telegram had been filed at Miami Beach, Florida, at eight-thirty that morning, prepaid. It was short and sweet: DISREGARD PREVIOUS MESSAGE. LOVE. ALICE DAVIDSON.

“Sweet spirits of turpentine!” exploded the Inspector.

Then there had been the telephone call from Phoenix, Arizona shortly before ten that morning. It had been person-to-person, but the party had been willing to leave a message. “Just tell Inspector Piper that I didn’t mean what I said yesterday. This is Mae Carter speaking, Mae with an *e*.”

Piper shook his head, somewhat dazed. Next was a prepaid telegram from Los Angeles which had come in a little after noon, signed *Ethel Brinker*: PAY NO ATTENTION TO THE LETTER. And finally there was another

phone call from Sun Valley, station-to-station, which had been taken a few minutes ago by one of the men at the switchboard. Mrs. Atkins said to tell Inspector Piper that all bets were off.

“And you say that Captain Gruber took no action on these?”

Fink nodded, and then shook her head. “No, he didn’t.”

Three messages yesterday—and a letter last week—from widely differing parts of the country. And today four more canceling out the first—from the same people and, except for Brinker, the same times and places. But in that mad garbled message that Miss Withers had dictated to Fink she had made one thing clear. Ethel Brinker was dead.

That, and one thing more. The last line about *Pick a flower tomorrow, especially if it has false teeth*. Allowing for Fink’s peanut brain, could that have originally been *Pick up Flower tomorrow*?

Piper made a quick check and found that Captain Gruber on his own authority had rescinded the order to have the Quinn woman brought in for questioning. The Department had no further interest in her.

“But I have,” said the Inspector. He paused to fill his pockets with cigars and then went out of the place. Playing a long-shot, he went across town to the Village, wondering how you could ask a woman if she wore a denture. Finally he located Flora Quinn’s apartment, where nobody answered his knock and there was a quart of milk and a newspaper on the mat. These things in themselves might not have meant anything, but he noticed the tiny end of a paper match-stub stuck into the crack of the door jamb at eye level. One of the boys who came down yesterday to try to take the woman in for questioning must have been an old-timer, for it was a trick Piper had learned in his first year in plain-clothes and still sometimes relied upon. If the door had been opened by anybody the stub would have fallen. Flower was still among the missing.

And Hildegarde had been gone for more than twenty-four hours. Even though there was nothing to report, the Inspector remembered that he had promised to let Jeeps Davidson know the situation sometime today. When he reached home he put through a call to Bagley’s Mills.

“Jeeps isn’t home!” a clear girlish voice announced. “No, we don’t know where she is.”

“Another one!” Piper said, and hung up.

He tried for a while to read, and found that he was going through the same paragraph over and over without understanding it. Then he turned on the radio, catching the nine o'clock news. The body of an unidentified woman had been recovered from the Hudson by state police.

Immediately he called Headquarters. "But, Inspector," protested the man at the switchboard, "that body was found 'way up the river, near Kingston. It couldn't be Miss Withers."

"Why not? She's just contrary enough so if she fell in the river you'd naturally have to look upstream for her!"

But a flash had just come in—that body had been identified as a missing ice-skater. The Inspector poured himself a triple whisky and water, sniffed it, and then threw it glass and all into the sink and went to bed.

All the way across the country, while the big airliner bucked and dipped in the winter turbulence, Flora Quinn killed time in her seat by the window, working herself up to the point. She was dressed in a brown gabardine suit that had been Harriet Bascom's, plus the mutation mink stole that had been part of the lovely loot in the six suitcases, and though she gaped a little at the seams and had difficulty in breathing, she felt somehow arrayed in courage and confidence. Manners may make the man, but clothes make the woman.

Half an hour before landing time she took out her handbag and put on fresh make-up over the old, but all the time her mind was busily rehearsing. It was important that she start off on the right foot—let him know who's boss. He wasn't going to have a chance to get set.

She remembered something that she had seen long ago just outside her apartment window—a fierce striped hornet had blundered into a spiderweb and then buzzed angrily, stinging at nothing and entangling itself deeper and deeper. And then finally the fat little spider had come sidling closer—and pounced.

Flora practiced her opening speech over and over to herself, with variations. There was the man-to-man approach: "Well, I've pulled it off for you, dearie. Just like you said, letter perfect. Now let's find a quiet place and sit down and talk about a different cut for little Flower, huh?"

Or she could make it sweet: "I did it for you, big boy. I'd do anything for you, you know that. We've been good pals for a long, long time. Gonna

take care of Flower so she never has to go back and work in a damn beauty parlor again?"

The main thing was to make him know right off that he hadn't fooled her with his phony reasons for what she'd had to go and do. She was on to him, and in it all the way. And she'd let him see that she didn't care, that in fact she really admired him for it. Only of course, now she was in the know the payoff would have to be stepped up. Nobody could be expected to take the risks she had for just peanuts.

It would be handled nice and cozy, in some little cocktail bar. Maybe he wouldn't take a drink in the daytime, but she would anyway. The warmth of the liquor inside her would make her one up on him—it always sharpened her wits.

And she'd need 'em sharp. Of course she couldn't deny even to herself that it had been a shock when she realized what she was mixed up with. But this thing was money in the bank if she played it right. She was still young enough, and with most of her looks. She could go out to California or somewhere, and maybe start up in business again. She might even get married. Maybe he would marry her, if she put on the pressure the right way.

She could handle him. Maybe she'd even keep him uncomfortable and guessing just at first. Because he needed paying back for letting her start out in the dark like that, on almost no notice at all. Maybe he'd been afraid that she wouldn't play ball and carry out instructions if she knew the whole story, but he ought to have wised her up anyway. With all the heat that was on because of those *Wanted* flyers, those posters that covered the country.

By the time the *No Smoking* sign came on, and the hostess passed through the plane to see that landing belts were fastened, Flora had decided not to worry any more about what to say. She would have to ad lib when the time came.

The plane came down out of the overcast and stood on one wing, so that she could look down out of her window and see all Philadelphia. Then they were down, and she was walking across the runway, her face set in the warm, expectant smile she liked best.

But there was no sign of him at the gate, or in the waiting-room. No message at the desk for Mrs. Herbert Baker. Finally she picked up her bag—Harriet Bascom's bag—at the baggage counter, and headed for a taxicab.

The smile on her wide mouth had by that time altered into an extremely nasty pout. If he thought—

Then he fell into step beside her, just outside the doorway. Her face lighted, and she turned expectantly for a kiss, but he only took the bag out of her hand. "The car's over here."

"But—"

"Not here," he said out of the side of his mouth. "You're hot. That's why I had you land here instead of coming on to New York." He was hurrying so that she almost had to run to keep up with him.

They came to where the car was parked, and she peered inside and then turned blankly to face him, clutching at his arm. "Where's Sugar? Why didn't you bring her?"

"Never mind that. She's all right. You can pick her up at the vet's any time."

He slammed the door, went around on the other side, and slid behind the wheel. They went out into the street doing forty in second.

"What's got into you?" she demanded.

"Just that when I came down to pick up the dog that night there was somebody in the apartment. You know what that means, don't you? I heard a lot of noise in the kitchenette, and somebody screaming. I scooped up the dog and just barely got out of there."

Flora's jaw dropped slackly. "But who could have been in there? I had that lock put on special. There's only two keys and you got one and me the other."

He shrugged. "That isn't all. There was a big shamus staked outside the place all day yesterday. They pulled him off for some reason today, but I don't like it. You've got to get far, far away."

"What, and leave all my stuff? And those new clothes?"

"Maybe you won't have to. They'll keep, as long as the rent is paid. We can have somebody come in and pack them."

She sighed. "Well, I could go out and stay with Big Reba in Santa Barbara. Only she's probably suspicious enough already, because of my asking her to remail that letter to the Doghaven people."

"Out of the country," he insisted. "Mexico, maybe."

Her little eyes, like bits of dirty glacier ice, grew littler still. "I'm not that hot, big boy. And we're not in that much of a hurry. Stop at a bar

somewhere, will you? We got to have a talk."

"What about?"

"Oh, everything. I pulled it off for you, didn't I? Working in the dark, too. But, dearie, not any more. Let's have a friendly little drink and a nice talk about a new deal for Flower, huh?"

He drove on for a block or so, in silence. "At least wait until we get out of the city traffic."

She had never seen him drive like this, winding in and out, beating the lights, with a constant eye out for traffic cops. A faint uneasiness began to possess her. "Where we going, if New York is so hot for me?"

"Just a place where you can stay quiet for a day or so, while I get hold of some money and make the arrangements."

Flora thought about that for a while. This wasn't going as she had planned in the plane, not at all. "Pull up somewhere," she said. "I'm out of cigarettes."

"There are some Camels in the glove compartment."

Angrily she jerked it open. There were the cigarettes—and a full pint bottle.

"Oops, I struck oil!" Flora cried.

But he said, "I forgot that was there. You leave it alone!" so quickly that the formless little suspicion in the back of her mind died without ever reaching the surface.

"Why should I?" Again she was mistress of the situation, with the whip hand. She held the bottle well out of his reach.

"Because I say so. This is no time to have you getting tight."

Flora almost laughed. "I'm tired and I'm cold. One won't hurt me."

"I said, 'No!'"

She twisted the cap, not noticing how easily it came free. Then she tilted the bottle, as he made ineffectual efforts to stop her and drive at the same time. "Who's giving orders?" Flora asked. "Look, big boy. I'll lay it on the line. A wife can't testify against her husband, right?"

"Right," he said, looking pleased, as if she had suddenly told him a secret that he had always wanted to know.

She felt the reassuring warmth of the liquor within her. "Okay, I'll go to Mexico or anywhere you say. But understand, it's like this. You'll have to come with me, legitimate too. Because one thing I've always wanted is a

man of my own. And you got class. No matter what you do, no matter how many dumb dames you've—" She suddenly sat up a little straighter. "Say, this bonded stuff sure beats the blended—I'm floating. But sharp as a tack, big boy. We're going to get married, and then we'll go anywhere you say. What you think of that?"

"It's an idea," he admitted.

She tipped the bottle again, holding it a long time. "Great idea. Knew you'd see it m'way. Because you're a reasonable man. Hot in here, isn't it?" Her stubby pinkish-gray fingers with the long red nails pawed at the window-handle. "Stuffy, you must have heater on. But don't think I'm getting looped."

"Poor Flora," he said, still looking ahead at the rolling highway.

"Because I'm not, see?" And she gave him what was meant to be a warning glare. But her face blanched, as if for a moment she saw through him, into the murky horror that was his mind. Suddenly all the armor was gone, all the courage and self-assurance that had been hers. She was naked and helpless, she was just foolish old Flora Quinn trapped in a speeding car with the only man in her life she couldn't handle. She remembered the hornet and the fat little black spider, only she herself was the one with buzzing, impotent wings.

"No tricks, now," her voice whispered, almost mechanically. "'m not looped, unerstan'?"

Her heavy head rolled loosely on her neck, and then fell back against the seat. She began to breathe heavily through her mouth.

"No, you're not looped," he said agreeably. And as she sagged against him he considerably cut the speed down to forty. There was no hurry now; the night was young. . . .

It was barely daylight next morning when Inspector Oscar Piper came back to the world of reality and realized that somebody was hammering heavily on his door. Still half asleep and groggy, he went down the stairs, bare shanks beneath his bathrobe, and then was suddenly surrounded by Jeeps Davidson, Tad, and a joyous French poodle.

The girl caught his eye. "Then there's no news."

"Nothing. I tried to phone you, but you weren't home."

“I know. We drove all night. But anyway, Tad and I know that she’s all right—I mean, she isn’t losing her senses or anything. Because she solved our problem, but good. When I got home I found Tad there, in the bosom of my family. And think, he went just because of a hint Miss Withers gave him. She told him that in her opinion a young man shouldn’t ever fall in love unless he had had a chance to meet and know the girl’s family first. So he just up and went back there. I had to pry my sisters off him one by one, but he’s still mine!”

“Is that good?” murmured the Inspector to himself. “Anyway, come in and shut the door.” He drew the fragile bathrobe closer around him.

“You see,” Jeeps continued breathlessly, “it was all a silly misunderstanding between us. Tad and I were each trying to fool the other. I thought I had to impress him by letting on how I was the petted belle of Bagley’s Mills and my father was a judge and we lived in the biggest house in town. Well, Daddy did use to be a Justice of the Peace and the house is the biggest but it’s also the oldest and most run-down place in town too.”

As she ran down the young man said, “I didn’t think Jeeps would understand about my making all that dough in the Sphinx club I helped start in the hotel. So I made up that yarn about my rich uncle giving me the car. I don’t have any uncle, I don’t even have any folks. When I graduated from the Belanger Home for Orphan Boys up in Buffalo I took the founder’s name, and made it Thaddeus Belanger III just because I liked the way it sounded.”

The Inspector stifled a yawn. “Well, well. So—”

“So we’re back here to help find her!” Jeeps cried. “I just know that if we study that message she left, and the little black book—”

Piper was wide awake. “You haven’t been to Seventy-Fourth Street yet, then?”

Tad shook his head. “We came through the Hudson Tunnel, and stopped here on our way uptown. Jeeps thought you’d be the one to know if there was anything new.”

In spite of himself the Inspector began to catch a little of their enthusiasm. “Wait here,” he said, and went hastily up the stairs. He came down a few minutes later, struggling into his coat.

“Okay, let’s go,” he said. They raced uptown through the miraculously deserted streets of Manhattan, crossed the Park, and pulled up at last outside

the brownstone building on 74th Street. As they came to the door of the second-floor rear apartment Piper suddenly stiffened, pointing. He was pointing at the crack in the door, but there was nothing there. The match-stub that he had left there yesterday morning had dropped out.

“Somebody inside,” he said, very softly. Jeeps handed him the key, and he turned it without making a sound. The door opened, an inch at a time—and then Talley twisted away from Tad Belanger and went romping inside, barking at the top of his voice.

Miss Hildegarde Withers was at home, though she still wore her hat and coat. She was sitting beside her cherished dining-room table, smiling happily as she watched two cigarettes burn themselves deep into the soft waxed finish. One was red with lip rouge at one end, the other plain.

She absently patted the head of the ecstatic dog, but barely gave the others a nod. “I’ll say hello later,” she said.

*“Nothing is certain but death and taxes.”*

—Benjamin Franklin

## 16

“THERE!” SIGHED MISS WITHERS AT LAST, in weary triumph. “That settles it. It was a minor point, but I had to be sure.” She turned to face them. “Well, don’t all stand there staring at me as if you thought I was out of my wits!”

“I didn’t really think so until now,” the Inspector told her.

“But the table top has to be refinished anyway. Can’t you see? I thought that Jeeps had been careless with a cigarette, but the one I discovered here Tuesday night was completely burned away to ashes. A cigarette with lipstick on the end burns down to the stain and goes out. So—some man was here in the apartment that morning while I was tied up over at the Grandee going through all those hotel records. He got in with a skeleton key, I presume. And he got so interested in what he found that he forgot about his cigarette. He was studying the black looseleaf notebook, of course—making notes on everything we knew about the missing women. Because those messages from all over the country had to sound genuine if they were to have the effect of forever putting an end to the investigation.”

Jeeps said, “Then Mr. Nemo dared to come here because he knew I worked in the morning—and that you were tied up at the Grandee!”

“Correct. I’m sorry, my dear, for misjudging you. Not only about the burned table. I was almost certain that you had been careless, and either given away our secrets to Tad or else let him have a chance to study the notebook—”

“But she never—” Tad broke in.

“I know. And you, young man, were not selling information to Mr. Nemo or blackmailing him either. How did you get hold of the money for the new car? Was it a crap game?”

Together they told her about the Sphinx club that had started among some of the bellboys, and how people had fallen over themselves to pay five dollars.

“Another chain-letter racket. Will that never stay dead? Dear, dear.”

Tad looked sheepish. “I know. Jeeps has been pointing some things out to me, for my own good. I’ve promised to make my living the hard way after this.”

“Let’s hope so.” Miss Withers was in the kitchen, measuring out coffee into the percolator.

“Look,” said the Inspector. “We may not have much time. Hildegarde, are you really all right? Have you any idea as to what’s been going on around here in the last thirty-six hours? Where have you been, and why didn’t you let somebody know?”

“Well, Oscar, I had a dream. I know you always say you would rather hear it rain on a tin roof than hear anyone tell his dreams, but anyway, the dream told me that the Ethel Brinker letter was a fake. It was prepared here, and sent out to Santa Barbara to be remailed, with the intention of drawing our attention in the wrong direction. But the initials RN after the signature were an unnecessary touch, and it seemed odd to me that anybody could own a dog like Talley here and not even refer to him by name in a letter about him. But the dream reminded me of something I had forgotten—that Ethel Brinker had told the man at the boarding-kennels that there was a rabies epidemic where she was going. The only one in the nation that week was at Miami Beach—and the letter was postmarked Santa Barbara, California.”

“Wait a minute,” Piper said. “The signature on the letter matched the ones on the dog’s papers.”

“Yes, Oscar. But I found out from the associate manager of the AKC that they send out blank registration forms and pedigrees to anyone who asks. Mr. Nemo had the original papers on Talley, which were among Ethel Brinker’s effects. He simply copied off the pedigree, wrote the name of the breeder on both pedigree and application, and then had someone—probably Flower Quinn—sign Ethel Brinker’s name three times. So they all matched. He probably knew that we didn’t have a genuine Brinker signature with which to make comparisons. But Talley was bred by Pillicoc Kennels, one of the largest in the country. The man at the AKC didn’t even have to look up the files to recognize that the name of the Pillicoc manager written on the pedigree and application form in the fake Brinker letter were clumsy forgeries.”

“Pillicoc,” murmured the Inspector. “Fink got it down as ‘Pollywog.’”

“Like many other criminals,” Miss Withers continued, as with Jeeps’s help she began to stir up a batch of muffins, “Mr. Nemo was all right until he had to call on an accomplice. Flora Quinn had gone to the auction at his

request to bid on Harriet Bascom's belongings, because he didn't dare have other people pawing through them for fear of what might be there.

Naturally she was the logical person to send on the grand tour. The moment he got the data from my notebook he summoned her—she had to leave without even having her breakfast or making provision for her Chihuahua. But off she went."

"No," Piper said. "Not unless she had a private jet-job. Flora Quinn couldn't have faked those calls, it isn't physically possible."

"Isn't it?" Miss Withers dropped bacon in the pan. "Well, I did it the day after, retracing her steps. I took an evening plane for Miami and bribed a porter to send a telegram signed 'Alice Davidson' for me next morning when the office opened. Then that same night I took a plane for Phoenix, Arizona, arriving in plenty of time next morning to make the phone call that supposedly was from Mae Carter, Mae with an *e*. Right back on a plane for Los Angeles where I went Flower one better by sending you a telegram signed Brinker, and then up to Sun Valley, Idaho, to close the books with the call from Atkins."

"So that's where you were!" Jeeps cried.

"Of course. The Inspector here would have known my voice, but he wasn't around to receive my calls. And he didn't know Flora's voice, so he had nothing to go by. Southern accent indeed! When she got to Sun Valley she simply took out her teeth, and that changes anybody's voice. Simple, isn't it?"

"Wait a minute," the Inspector said. "You actually went all over the country, sending in those second messages that canceled the first series?"

"But of course. To prove that it could be done. I had to jump back and forth from one airline to another—no one company could maintain the schedule. If I hadn't proved it by actually doing it, you'd have said I was crazy when I told you."

They were sitting down to the table now. But the Inspector still had no appetite for breakfast. "Hildegarde, I hate to tell you this. But there was some idea downtown—Well, to cut it short they were talking about putting you away for observation. Because of everything—the phone message about flowers and pollywogs, and what you said over the phone about flying, but dogs can't fly—"

Her eyebrows went up. "But they *can't*! The baggage compartments on most planes aren't pressurized. Pets have to be carried there, and at high altitudes they would get serious anoxia. That was why I had to leave Talley behind, just as Flower Quinn had to leave her Mexican hairless."

The Inspector turned to the boy and girl, who were eating enough for all of them. "I might have known it. Half the time she talks in riddles, and then when I think she's talking in riddles she means just what she says. She can fly, but dogs can't." He faced the schoolteacher. "Hildegarde, there's a pickup order out for you, in spite of all I could do. How did you get here? Didn't you have any trouble at the airport?"

"Trouble? What trouble would I have? As it happened, there was almost no ceiling here, so they set us down at Newark. I took the tube, and then a taxi home. There wasn't any use trying to trace the Quinn woman, though she had left a wide trail as far as Philadelphia. So I stopped to send a telegram—you see, I knew it was time that Mr. Nemo was forced out into the open."

They all stopped eating and watched her, doubtful again.

"You mean there's uncertainty among you as to who he is? It was obvious enough all the time, or should have been. I simply visualized him wrong. Remembering my own susceptible, introspective girlhood, I looked for a glamour man. But women like Harriet Bascom, and Jeeps's Aunt Alice and the rest, were only looking for security. Jonathan the artist saw that, in their faces. They wanted a husband, they wanted a solid sort of citizen who had a grapefruit grove in Santa Barbara, or its equivalent in some equally attractive vacation spot. Only Harriet had a critical, canny side to her nature—she even subscribed to *Consumers' Guide*, remember? So before she eloped with Mr. Nemo she checked up on him by calling the Chamber of Commerce out there where he claimed to have his grapefruit groves. And then she made the mistake of confronting him with what she had discovered. So he killed her, then and there. Instead of doing it quietly somewhere else later, as he did with the others."

"If you know this much," the Inspector said, "what's his name?"

Miss Withers shook her head. "You always say you don't want guesswork, you want proof. I knew that it would take only a little pinch of a catalyst to make the reaction take place—so I sent the telegram. It was to Mr. Brady at the Grandee. I asked him to get in touch with the valet at the

hotel and find out who among the guests or employees had sent a suit or overcoat out to be cleaned last Tuesday—one that was covered with apricot-colored dog hairs.”

Piper set down his coffee cup with a bang. “Now, listen—”

“I know,” she went on, “that Mr. Nemo himself came here and peeked into the looseleaf notebook Tuesday morning, and Talley was here. You know how he acts toward people, strangers or old friends, especially when he’s lonely? And he does shed, just terribly.”

“Kiley’s right, after all,” said the Inspector. “You’re crazy, or I am.” Even Jeeps and Tad looked doubtful, and only Talleyrand was loyally confident. He lay with his chin on Miss Withers’s foot, his eyes alight with love and his jaws drooling at the smell of bacon.

“But, Oscar, if you’ll only listen—”

“You can’t prove a murder—much less five murders—with dog hair, I don’t care what color.”

“Who’s trying to? That’s incidental. There was something else in the telegram. I asked Mr. Brady who among the people in the hotel knew about his farm, or had been invited out there or permitted to use it for week-ends.”

Tad Belanger suddenly strangled on a piece of muffin, and Jeeps had to pound him between the shoulder blades.

The Inspector was tapping his fingers on the table, with a baleful patience. “So—?”

“So less than half an hour after I sent that telegram, Mr. Nemo himself came rushing over to pay a call,” continued the schoolteacher. “In the flesh. I presume that he had intentions of silencing me forever.”

“Not a bad idea,” said the Inspector wholeheartedly. “Will you get to the point? I suppose he came in and cut you up into little bits, and now we’re talking to your spook or something?”

“It might have been,” she told him. “Only I was prudently hiding out across the street, in the areaway, trying to look like an old garbage can in the half-light of the early morning. He came upstairs, and was gone rather a long time, so I presume he searched the place rather thoroughly.”

“Who?” demanded Piper. “If you saw him that close—”

“You still don’t know?” Miss Withers turned to the others. “Class?”

Tad looked blank, but Jeeps caught her breath and said, “Brady!” very softly.

Miss Withers turned back to the Inspector. "Oscar, don't you see yet why it was that the death of Harriet Bascom looked so much like a suicide to the official eye? It was because during the brief interval while the window was closed the stage was being set by a man who'd been a police officer himself most of his life, a man who knew all the tricks and the formulas. Yet now he had an executive job in a big hotel, with nobody to watch his comings and goings. Most of the guests thought he was one of themselves, because he dressed well, usually wore a hat and coat, and was the direct antithesis of the traditional hotel dick. He made his own hours, and had every opportunity to pick his victims, meet them casually somewhere else, and convince them that he was the man they had been looking for all their lives. Because he simply epitomized security—"

"He should, his title was chief of it," Tad put in.

"And yet," continued the schoolteacher, "he had opportunity of knowing Flower Quinn when she was in her heyday out in New Jersey, being on the Jersey City detective force. He of course recognized her when she tried to go legitimate and went back to her old trade of beautician and masseuse in the Grandee's Cathedral de Beauté. So when things got tough and he needed her, he used her."

The Inspector was sitting on the edge of his chair, an unlighted cigar in his mouth and a look of complete incomprehension on his face. "I must be nuts," he said. "You're trying to tell me that Brady actually came over here a little while ago, came up to this apartment—"

She nodded. "I know it goes against the grain, Oscar. But the worst sheep-killer is the shepherd dog who goes wrong."

"You knew he was the murderer, and you let him get away?"

She nodded again. "But he had to get away, don't you see?"

"No, I do not see."

Miss Withers sighed. "It was proof enough for me just to see him come running over here, a gun sagging in his pocket, because I had sent him that telegram hinting that I knew a little and not quite enough. But I realized that you needed a great deal more than that if you were going to arrest him. So—I used the paint."

The Inspector turned to the young couple. "So she used the paint! Does this make any more sense to you than it does to me?"

“On the top of his car, Oscar! While he was up here in the apartment I took a can of paint that I had left over from doing the kitchen shelves, nice white paint, and I painted a big white circle on his Lincoln sedan. It’s a big, old-fashioned car, built high enough so that I don’t think he noticed it when he got in. And now he’s driving it helter-skelter to wherever it was he disposed of his victims, no doubt.”

“To Canada, you mean. Or else—”

“No, Oscar. He doesn’t know how much I know, and his first thought will be to move those bodies somewhere else, where they won’t point at him. And besides, his loot must be hidden there too. It wasn’t in his suite at the Grandee—I looked through it when he left me there that day.”

Piper stood up. “Maybe you’re right. I hope so. But what good is a white circle on the top of his car? If he couldn’t see it when he got in, then how can police spot it from the ground or from a cruise car? And when we don’t even know which way he’s headed?”

She told him, a little hesitantly, what she had in mind. And she showed him a road map, with a route marked in red. “His farm is in the Sourland Hills country of southwestern New Jersey, I believe. And this is the most direct route. He left here an hour and seven minutes ago, so it shouldn’t be difficult.”

“Judas priest in a jug!” muttered the Inspector softly. He teetered on his toes for a moment, weighing the possibilities one against the other. Then a slow, leprechaunish smile came across his face, and he went to the telephone.

And so it was that as Max F. Brady dug frantically at the one unfrozen spot in his 300 acres of barren, abandoned farm land—the great steaming compost heap behind the dairy barn—the awkward dragon-fly plane which had been hovering in and out of the overcast during the last twenty miles of his frenzied drive finally came out into the cold winter sunlight and began to settle down over him, its great windmill wings circling slower and slower.

It had landed in his barnyard before he could make out the insignia of the New York Police Department on the fuselage of the Bell D-47 helicopter. And then it was too late to run. There was no time even to throw the mingled lime and chemicals and organic refuse back over the bodies of

the five women partially buried there, with Flower Quinn on top and still a little warm.

It was all very irregular. The Inspector had no right—even though he still held the nominal rank of Acting Chief Inspector—to order out the Department's helicopter and send it on so long a mission. New York police had no authority to arrest Max Brady or anybody else in the sovereign state of New Jersey. But they did it just the same.

When all the returns were in down at the Municipal Building the Old Man was very nice about the whole thing. He blew one smoke ring thoughtfully through another and said, "Well, after all, results are what count. It's a nice case, and we've got our man. Your name was signed to those Wanted flyers. Piper, what do you want? I mean anything at all. Want Dan Kiley's job? I believe that he's going back to the private practice of law."

"That I do not, sir," said Oscar Piper. And he announced his choice. Next morning he was back at Centre Street with the teletype making music in the corner and a fine view of a bare brick wall from the one window. Phones were ringing without pause, detectives and informers and stoolies and suspects marched through the corridors, and over it all was the throbbing hum of the vast police machine that rattled and hitched and missed a beat now and then but never stopped turning day or night.

Back at the old familiar oaken desk, his first official act was to light up a long greenish-brown panatela and then call Miss Hildegarde Withers. "You are speaking to the new skipper of Homicide," he announced.

"Oh, Oscar! I'm so glad." Then she hesitated. "But what about me?"

"Huh? Oh, I fixed that. The heat is off. You don't have to go to Bellevue for psychiatric observation, after all."

"This is no time for cheap Hibernian humor. Oscar, do you remember my telling you about those men that took turns lurking outside my door, spying on me? Well, they finally pounced. They're from the Department of Internal Revenue and they've been tracing the money that Harriet Bascom won at the race-track and hid in her old valise. They tracked me down through the address I left at the auction, and now they want thousands and thousands of dollars."

"Why—" And he thought a moment. Then he made a suggestion.

"Thank you, Oscar. I—I couldn't do without you, and I hope I never have to try." She hung up and turned to face the two stern gentlemen who sat in her living-room, stiffly trying to ward off the impetuous advances of Talleyrand the French poodle. "Of course," said the schoolteacher brightly, "I understand that all income, even that from gambling, must be reported."

"Gambling?" said the thickset man.

"But of course. I gambled seven dollars at the auction and won. I intend to report my winnings in my return March fifteenth. But there were expenses—" And she got out the expense account. "It's all here, down to the last penny."

The young man in the glasses took the sheet and read it carefully. Then he read it again and looked up, his face flushed. "Fifty dollars for a poodle—five hundred for a drawing—a dollar for false eyelashes—"

"I have all the receipted bills, too—"

His voice rose. "Rental of chinchilla coat—hotel bill—taxicabs—printing, mailing, and advertising—a reward to Hoppy Muller, and others to Alice Davidson and Tad Belanger—traveling expenses, taxicabs, phone calls. . . ."

"All gambling losses," she informed them. "I gambled on bringing a murderer to justice, and the grand jury found a true bill against Max Brady only last Monday. I'm afraid the total is almost the whole eleven thousand dollars, isn't it?"

A little later the two revenue men arose, trying vainly to dust apricot-colored dog hairs from their severely neat blue suits. They were outside in the street before they stopped. "She can't do that!" said the tall man with glasses. Then he added, "Or can she?"

"There isn't any precedent—" put in the other. They stood there in a huddle for a little while.

But finally, when Talley came plunging joyously down the steps to take Miss Withers for a walk which was eventually to lead them to an inspection of Jeeps Belanger's new one-room apartment, the men were gone.

Turn the page to continue reading from the Hildegarde Withers Mysteries

A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK



# STUART PALMER

A  
HILDEGARDE  
WITHERS  
MYSTERY



*The*  
Green Ace



“Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out.”

—*John Webster*

IF THERE ARE EVER nights for murder, this was one. All through the previous day a blazing August sun had blasted Manhattan's concrete anthill, and now in the early morning walls and pavements still radiated the heat, baking hapless inhabitants in their damp wrinkled beds. Even on Staten Island, that queer lost borough of New York City which except for the turgid ditch called the Kill van Kull would properly have been part of New Jersey, the heat lay like a solid but invisible sweatshirt over the land.

On such a night tempers wear thin. There is an unexplored link between variations in the temperature curve and the murder index. In certain parts of southern Europe there are laws still extant on the statute books which forbid indictments for capital crimes committed during the time of the *mistral*, that hot searing wind off the wastes of the Sahara. History tells us that it was a stifling summer day when Lizzie Borden took her famous ax in hand, a steaming June morning when Joseph Elwell, the bridge expert and aging gallant, got a bullet through his bald head, and a sultry Fourth of July when Augusta Nack cut up the romantically tattooed Willie Guldensuppe. And so on and so on.

At three o'clock Saturday morning Hylan Avenue, lifeline of Staten Island, was lonely and deserted except for a blue sedan, headed south a little faster than the law allows. At that hour, in the sparse traffic of the suburbs, such infractions are usually winked at. But Lady Luck is a woman, and as Porgy used to sing, "A woman is a sometime thing." It happened that the car whisked past two police officers just as they came out of an owl restaurant full of Denver sandwiches, coffee, and renewed zeal. They watched it ignore the stop-signal at the corner of New Drop and spin left toward the lonely Atlantic beaches.

So the officers threw away their toothpicks and took off after it in the prowl car, with one brief wolf-wail of the siren. As they drew alongside their red spotlight cast a bloody glow over the lone man at the wheel, who obediently cut his speed and pulled sharply over to the curb. But then instead of hitting his brakes he let the big Buick coast slowly along until it smashed into the rear of a parked delivery truck, with a musical tinkle of headlight glass. The officers had only intended to give the driver a warning

and send him on his way, but now a ticket was indicated—a ticket and a minor accident report.

But he was slumped down behind the wheel, with nothing to say for himself. A flashlight in his face disclosed a handsome, slight fellow of around thirty, whose eyeballs had rolled upward so that only the whites were showing. He had fainted dead away; "Wilted like a lily," was the policemen's phrase.

The officers were no great shakes at investigation, or else they wouldn't have been cruising a bicycle-beat in uniform, but they soon discovered that there was something crammed against the back seat of the Buick, under an old army blanket. At first they took it for a store-window dummy, so white and waxen and artificial it was. Then they realized that window dummies come apart at the shoulders and waist, they do not bend their long legs up jackknife fashion. The pale flesh under the cop's exploring hand was clammy, and he jerked back as if he had touched a hot stove.

"A dame!" he whispered. "A great big dead beautiful naked dame!"

His partner shook the driver's shoulder. "Wake up, bud, we want to talk to you." It was the prize understatement of the week.

Behind the wheel Andy Rowan moaned in the grip of a nightmare. They brought him back to consciousness, but the nightmare went on. It went on for over a year.

“Who can refute a sneer?”

—*William Paley*

# 1.

THE JOKER IN ANDREW Rowan's last will and testament, a document witnessed by the prison chaplain and one Paul Huff, keeper in the death-house, was supposed to be a secret. But there are few secrets long kept from the warden at Sing Sing. That earnest official got wind of it through the prison grapevine, swore efficiently if a bit rustily, and then put through a long distance call to Centre Street, which happens to be the headquarters of the New York police department.

Inspector Oscar Piper, grizzled and long-suffering skipper of the homicide bureau, muttered incoherent thanks for the tip-off and then crashed his desk phone into its cradle and yelped, "Judas Priest in a mixmaster, why does *everything* have to happen to me?"

He was talking to himself, but at that singularly inauspicious moment a certain spinster schoolma'am crashed the gates of his private office on business connected with the sale of tickets to a charity bazaar for the Fresh-Air Fund, and from his last words drew a natural but quite erroneous conclusion. "Oscar!" cried Miss Hildegarde Withers indignantly, "will you never tire of casting rude aspersions at my taste in hats?"

The Inspector looked up at his old friend and erstwhile sparring-partner without welcome or warmth. He could have said with some reason that the bonnet she wore today appeared to have had old fruit and vegetables cast at it already, but at the moment he was in no mood for badinage. "Oh, it's you again!" he said, shoulders sagging. "Whatever's on your mind I don't want any. Goodbye *please*!"

But Miss Withers sat down anyway. From her long and sometimes stormy association with Oscar Piper she knew that like most conscientious policemen the Inspector usually had a case of the jitters during the last days of anyone he had helped send up the river on sentence of death. "Ah!" she cried. "Something tells me you're fretting about the Harrington case again. Too bad Rowan isn't obliging enough to make a last-minute confession and set your mind at rest."

"*Confession?*" Piper winced as from a probe at an ulcerated tooth. "He made a will instead! The warden just phoned and broke the news.

Somehow Rowan's managed to hang onto \$3500 that I guess his defense lawyers didn't find out about, and he's leaving it to *me!*"

"What a nice gesture!" Then Miss Withers' gray-blue eyes narrowed. "Or is he trying to heap coals of fire on your head, perhaps?"

"More like a red-hot poker—but never mind. There's a stipulation in the will that I use the money, after he's dead of course, to make a *full and impartial* investigation of the murder for which he is being *unjustly* executed."

She smiled wryly. "Chickens will come home to roost, won't they, Oscar?"

Savagely the Inspector ground out a new, unlighted perfecto. "And when Andy Rowan pays his debt to society the week of the twentieth that screwball will goes to probate, and leave it to somebody to break the details to the reporters. Maybe you can guess what certain newspapers will make of the story."

Miss Withers nodded. "*Read all about it! Rowan with Dying Gasp Bribes Police for Fair Play.* I see the point." Then her eyes nicked toward the wall calendar, brightening. "But, Oscar, thanks to the warden's warning, there's still time! You have almost nine days before Rowan walks that long last mile through the little green door to the hot-sit."

"*Hot-squat!*" he corrected her wearily. "And there hasn't been a little green door in the condemned block for years. Also, what do you mean I still have nine days? Nine days for what? Reopening the case wouldn't bring out anything new. Besides, I'd have to tell the Commish my reasons, and I'd almost rather die first."

"You mean you'd almost rather Rowan died first, guilty or not."

But Piper wasn't listening. "Why does the fellow take it out on me anyway? Why doesn't he blame the jury that convicted him, or the judge, or the district attorney? I'm only a cop doing my job. I collect evidence and make arrests, that's all." The Inspector sighed, and mopped his brow.

"I know, Oscar. But now we really must consider the possibility that there is more to this business of the will than just an attempt at a sneaky posthumous revenge against the one person Rowan rightly or wrongly blames for his conviction. Just suppose for a moment that the man is really innocent."

"Suppose my foot! Let's not start that again. Rowan is guilty as hell."

“Perhaps so,” the schoolteacher came back, frowning a little. “But there is always the possibility, however remote, of a miscarriage of justice. After all, the implication in the man’s making this unorthodox disposition of his money is that there’s a needle in the woodpile somewhere. Aren’t you going up to Sing Sing and have a talk with him at least?”

“Nothing of the kind. Rowan isn’t talking because he doesn’t dare to. Somewhere in the files we’ve got the 16-millimeter sound film we shot of him the morning he was arrested—we all thought he was going to confess, and wanted proof that he hadn’t been worked over in case he tried to repudiate the confession later. You ought to see it, he squirms and wriggles under the lights, and then clams up like a—”

“Like a clam? I can imagine, with all of you policemen shouting at him.”

“Relax, Hildegard! Rowan quit talking because there was one question he couldn’t answer then or since. It’s this—if he didn’t murder the Harrington girl, then why was he driving around half the night with a shovel and her dead body hidden in the back of his car?”

“Circumstantial evidence!” snapped Miss Withers. “Thoreau’s ‘trout in the milk.’ But couldn’t it have been planted there?”

“Are you daffy? They don’t plant trout in milk, they—”

“Please don’t be intentionally dense. I mean, of course, that the girl’s body could have been hidden in Rowan’s car by some person or persons unknown, for their own fell purposes.”

“No dice, Hildegard,” he said with weary gentleness. “Stop trying to set yourself up as a citizens’ committee of one, will you? The police are only human and we make mistakes, but not about an open-and-shut case like this one. Listen a minute. The thing happened when you were away on your vacation last summer, so you missed most of it. Andy Rowan was a former hack newspaperman turned press-agent—one of those smooth, glib-talking boys who hang around Sardi’s and Shubert Alley and Bleeck’s. Midge Harrington was his client, a big glamazon who was supposed to be getting the full treatment. She was trying, with the backing of some businessmen’s booster club out in her native Flatbush, for the Miss Brooklyn crown and a try at Atlantic City and the big Miss America splash later. It was Rowan’s job to get her name in the papers and her face and

gams in the picture weeklies. But Midge was a luscious hunk of stuff, with a pair of big round—”

“Oscar!”

“I was about to say, with a pair of big round heels. Nicely packaged goods, however. Pretty soon Midge and Andy were putting in a good deal of overtime, sometimes in the Stork and El Morocco and Pierre’s and sometimes at his wife’s town house up on Prospect Way, which was supposedly closed for the summer. I don’t suppose they spent the long summer evenings bringing her scrapbooks up to date or playing canasta. But Andy got tired first—”

“Someone said, Oscar, that the tragedy of love is that two people never fall out of it at the same time. Not, of course, that I’ve had much personal experience.”

He grinned. “Yeah, like in the song about the Strawberry Roan, they went up together and came down alone. About that time the beauty-queen campaign went haywire, which wouldn’t make Midge any sunnier in the disposition. She was probably putting the screws to Rowan, trying to get him to elope with her and threatening to go to his wife and spill the beans if he didn’t keep his promises. It was the simple case of a guy not wanting to lose his meal-ticket—his wife was a rich widow when he married her, and the straitlaced type to boot.”

“By the way, I seem to remember that she didn’t stand by Andy at the trial?”

“Can you blame her? It must have been a considerable shock to find that her handsome young husband had been playing boompasdaisy with a large economy-size blonde from Flatbush. When Natalie met and married Andy Rowan in Paris a few years after the war she was on an all-expense luxury tour and he had just been fired from a minor job with a foreign press bureau. She brought him home and put up the dough for his lush public-relations office over in the Chrysler Building. Hell hath no fury like a woman who’s been made a fool of.”

“Things aren’t always that simple.” Miss Withers craned her long neck, studying the papers spread out on the Inspector’s battered old oak desk. “Oscar, I notice that even before you heard from the warden something had impelled you to dig out the official file on this case, so you must have had an inner twinge or two of doubt.” She moved around beside

him, and picked up a photo. "Andy Rowan's a rather good-looking boy, even in this awful police picture. The mouth may be a little weak, but the eyes are nice . . ."

"Women!" exploded Oscar Piper. "I suppose a guy with nice curly hair and dimples can't be just as guilty as the next one?"

But she was skimming over the medical examiner's report. "Dead on arrival . . . asphyxia and hyoid fracture . . . well-nourished white female, identified as Midge Harrington, 18, showgirl and dancer . . . address Rehearsal Arts Club . . . by roommate Iris Dunn, 22, actress. No identifying scars, weight 156, height 5-11 . . . My, Oscar, she was a big girl for her age, wasn't she?"

The Inspector nodded. "Yes, she outweighed Rowan, who was a dapper little squirt. Probably she could have taken him in a fair fight. But she never had a chance. We figure it was a sort of sneak punch. When he met Midge at his wife's house that night he probably staged a fake reconciliation and then unwrapped the necklace as a peace offering. If he stood behind her to clasp it around her neck, the way a man does at a moment like that . . ."

"Why, Oscar!" cried Miss Withers, "I had no idea that you knew about such niceties. I'd have been willing to wager that even in your palmiest days you never gave a girl anything more than a pound box of candy, and then stuck around until the last gumdrop was finished."

"Okay, okay. Anyway, that's our reconstruction of how the murder occurred. With the necklace held tight around her neck, all Rowan had to do was to give just one hard jerk and it was all over, curtains." The Inspector rifled through the file and picked up another photograph. "Here, take a look at this and maybe you won't feel such a rush of motherly sympathy for poor Andy Rowan."

Miss Withers found herself staring at an enlarged close-up of the dead girl, obviously taken on a slab in the morgue, all wild hair and glaring eyes. She gulped, and then cocked her head curiously. "Oscar, that thing around her neck—?"

"That's not the murder weapon, just the stigmata it made. The necklace left an indelible mark in the tissues, four dots and a lozenge and so on. We know from this photo what it must have probably looked like."

"But you never succeeded in finding out where Rowan acquired it?"

“That we did not. But that sort of costume jewelry, *brummagen* is the trade name for it, is sold in half the stores in New York. You can’t often trace anything like that, the shopgirls sell too many of them. Anyway, *not* finding how he got it was about the only weak link in the chain of evidence.”

“And you didn’t find the necklace afterward, either?”

“We figure he simply dropped it off the ferryboat, along with her clothes, on the way to Staten Island. You can’t drag the whole Upper Bay. He probably wanted to drop the body too, but found too many people aboard who’d have heard that big a splash. He was picked up just half a mile from Midland Beach, you know. If he hadn’t passed that stop sign he’d probably have dug a nice grave for Midge in the sand somewhere, and maybe we wouldn’t have found her yet.”

“It all sounds very damning, almost too damning.” The schoolteacher stood up and crossed the room to stare intently at the view from the window, which gave onto a brick wall a dozen feet away. She said, “All the same, I’d like a talk with Rowan.”

“A talk in the death-house?” Piper thought that was funny. “Nobody but his wife or his lawyers could get in there, and they’ve all long since washed their hands of him. He’s as good as dead already, now that the appeal has failed. The Governor has intimated that he isn’t going to take any action, not with the public up in arms about the nationwide wave of crimes against women and children. Besides, suppose you did get to Rowan? What do you think an amateur snoop could worm out of him at this late date that trained detectives missed?”

“There’s such a thing as being overtrained! I confess now that I’ve always had certain doubts about the Harrington case just from what I’ve read about it. Suppose Rowan is innocent, as his writing that kind of will clearly indicates? Justice is justice, and on top of that I hate to see your hide nailed to the barn door by the yellow press. Perhaps Mrs. Rowan can be induced to help. What’s her address, Oscar?”

“Still 144 Prospect Way, as far as I know. But Hildegarde—”

“I know. I promised not to meddle any more, but this is a serious situation. I simply must take steps to save you in spite of yourself from an awful mistake!”

“Oh, *no!*!” cried the Inspector, feeling that the cure would be worse than the disease. So many of Miss Withers’ well-meant attempts at assisting him in the past had backfired that he hastily leaped to his feet, saying, “Hildegarde, wait a minute!”

“Like time and tide, I wait for no man,” she called over her shoulder. She was gone, leaving behind only a faint odor of soap, violet sec, and chalk dust.

Letting as usual no grass whatever grow under her stoutly clad feet, Miss Withers was soon hammering on the door of a big solid red-brick house overlooking Riverside Drive and the looming geometry of the George Washington Bridge. At first glance there was nothing here, even to her active imagination, to suggest that the place had ever been associated with murder and sudden death. The lawn was well kept, the shrubbery trimmed. But the windows were streaked and dusty, with drawn blinds, and no one answered her knock. Finally she started resolutely around to the rear, and almost stumbled over a fading sign stuck in the side lawn: “FOR IMMEDIATE SALE OR TRADE, Digby and Sons” …

She rounded the corner of the house, almost plunging into the brown and brittle tangle that had been a rose garden, and stopped short. A young man in a leather jacket was just letting himself out of the kitchen door—a tallish, weedy young man who started visibly when he saw her approach.

“One moment!” cried Miss Withers. “Young man, if you’re from the real estate brokers I’d like a chance to view the house.”

“Real estate?” he said blankly, in a cultured voice that was a cut or two above his extremely casual clothes. “I don’t understand.”

“The house is for sale, isn’t it? I’d like to look at it, and I want to get in touch with the owner.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you,” he said. “Sorry.” And he started off.

“But if you’re *not* from the realtor’s, then who are you?”

“Gas man,” he told her. “Just reading the meter.” And he was gone.

Miss Withers hammered on the back door, without much hope. She even tried the knob, but it was locked. There were French doors opening out onto a sort of raised sun porch, but every blind was drawn. Finally she gave it up and went away.

A telephone call to the real estate office produced only the information that they did not have the address of any Mrs. Andrew Rowan or Mrs.

Natalie Rowan, nor had the girl at the switchboard ever heard of her. The telephone book and city directory, were equally of no help whatever.

“I might have known!” observed the disappointed school-ma’am to herself as she left the phone booth. Mrs. Natalie Rowan had probably put her house up for sale through an intermediary and then taken herself off to some playground of the idle rich such as Bar Harbor or Santa Barbara, there to try to forget the unpleasant ceremony scheduled for the week of the twentieth. One could hardly blame her, under the circumstances, for wanting to be as far as possible from the last act of this sorry tragedy and all its attendant publicity. Still Miss Withers thought it would have been very helpful for her to know exactly where Natalie Rowan was, and just what if anything she was up to ...

Shortly before noon next day—Sunday—a limousine with uniformed driver pulled up outside dreary prison walls to disgorge a tall and expensive woman wearing bright yellow hair, an imposing mink jacket, and several diamond bracelets. She marched up to the entrance gate and demanded to see Andrew Rowan. In the face of the guard’s weary announcement that visiting hours were from two to four every second Wednesday, she pointed out that there would be little or no use in her returning next visiting day to pay a call on a dead husband. It was a point well taken. The gate guard made a telephone call and finally the visitor was permitted to enter, though not until she had come to the conclusion that Sing Sing is almost as hard to get into as out of.

Then she ran into a uniformed matron, who said firmly, “If you’ll just step in here, Mrs. Rowan? There are certain formalities.”

“Of course! I’m to be frisked or whatever you call it to make sure that I haven’t a saw or a file concealed on my person, to pass through the grating ...”

The matron’s smile was grim. “No danger of that, ma’am. You’ll see your husband through a glass barrier, and speak with a microphone. We’re not worried about such nonsense as saws and files, but we do keep a sharp look out for cameras.” The search was performed briskly and competently, with amazing thoroughness. Of course, some cameras these days were made very small, but still—

The visitor cooled her high heels in an anteroom for half an hour and then was led through a maze of corridors and finally ushered into a long hall split in half by a low table, with a dozen or so armchairs facing on either side. The table was divided by a heavy wire-inforced glass that ran clear to the ceiling. Everything was spotlessly clean, smelling of brown soap and lysol, but the stench of human shame and misery hung heavy in the air.

A wooden-faced guard sat overlooking the room from a raised armchair at one end; two more stood by the iron door in the opposite wall through which a man in shapeless prison gray was coming. It must be Andy Rowan—or what was left of him. Yet there was little or nothing about him to remind anyone of the handsome young chap who had fainted behind the wheel of the blue Buick or who had posed for the police photographs; his curly hair was cropped short and his drawn face was all nose and chin and staring eyes. As he was led forward he watched the floor, as if afraid of stumbling over an invisible obstacle.

The keeper in charge of him, a burly fellow with tight gray waves in his hair, was more alert. Without warning he caught the prisoner's arm, turned him around, and headed him back toward the iron door again—a round trip to nowhere. So near, and yet so far. Then, after the door had clanged on Andy Rowan again, the keeper briskly crossed the room, unlocked a panel in the dividing wall, and came through to the disappointed visitor.

“Mrs. Rowan?” He smiled professionally. “I’m sorry, there’s been a little mistake. You’re supposed to be cleared through the warden’s office for an interview with your husband when it isn’t a regular visiting day. If you’ll only come this way I’m sure it can all be ironed out in a few minutes.”

She started to protest, looking wistfully back over her shoulder. But the keeper’s hand was gripping her arm in that oily familiarity which becomes second nature to most men who are given the power of lock and key over their fellows. His knowing eyes and unctuous smile implied that there was some sort of unsavory understanding between them, some common secret. She twisted away, but they went back again, through more and more corridors and up a stair, where she finally sat alone in a bare waiting room for a little while and then at last was ushered into a suite of offices overlooking the prison yard. Her escort left her there, and she went forward

alone toward where a man was standing—a quiet, grayish person in tweeds, with deep worry lines etched across his forehead and caliper grooves from nose to mouth.

Indicating a chair, he said, “Mrs. Rowan? Sit down, please. I’m Warden Boyington.”

“How do you do?” she said a little weakly, as she refused a proffered cigarette.

“May I say, Mrs. Rowan, that you don’t look quite as I expected?”

“Oh yes, yes of course!” She even managed a wavering smile. “I *am* a little older than my poor husband, but—”

The warden held a gold lighter to his own cigarette. “I didn’t mean that. You seem,” he went on gently, “to have aged considerably, and also to have grown some three or four inches taller, since you were up here a couple of weeks ago.”

“But—why, naturally I’ve been sick with worry, and perhaps I’m not looking my best. And these high heels I’m wearing …” She stopped, and there was a long uncomfortable silence. Then Miss Hildegarde Withers hitched up her diamond bracelets and said, “Well, warden, it was worth trying anyway!”

Warden Boyington suddenly hit his desk so hard that all its accumulation of pens and little ornaments and vases of flowers leaped up into the air and did a little samba dance. “Damn it to hell, ma’am, I hate reporters!”

“But warden—”

“You’re under arrest. Now laugh that off.”

“Man, a hybrid of plant and ghost.”

—*Nietzsche*

## 2.

LAUGHTER WAS AT THAT moment farthest from Miss Wither's thoughts. There were a number of things she would have liked to say, but the warden wasn't giving her the chance. "It's time one of you people had a lesson," he remarked with some bitterness. "Once, before my term of office, a reporter sneaked a camera into the execution chamber, and next day the world was edified by a portrait of Ruth Snyder when the current scorched her. I suppose, ma'am, you thought it would be an equally smart scoop to get a sob-sister interview with a man in the condemned block by pretending to be his wife. You might just possibly have got away with it, if Keeper Huff hadn't been on his toes."

Miss Withers hastily took in sail and ran her true colors up to the masthead, only it turned out that the warden didn't like amateur detectives either! "But warden, just suppose this man Rowan is really innocent," she demanded during the next lull.

Warden Boyington looked at her with ill-concealed aversion. "They're *all* innocent, to hear them tell it. We've hardly ever had a convict in this place who didn't claim he was framed. Every man in the condemned block sits day after day puzzling over law books and trying out writs and briefs and appeals, figuring that the rest of his mates will have to die but *he*'s different. I tell you—"

"Tell me this," she said. "Rowan has been up here almost six months. You must know him, must have talked to him. Does he impress you as a guilty man?"

The warden shrugged. "How would I know? We've never had an 'innocent' man in the condemned cells, to my knowledge. They're as good as dead when they go in. I'll admit Rowan is confident, or claims to be, that some miracle will save him, but that's not uncommon."

"Only that odd will he made—"

"How'd you get wind of *that*?" Warden Boyington hit his desk again. "If Huff let that out of the bag—"

She shook her head. "I can't reveal my sources of information."

“Well, I’ll reveal something to you. It is my unpleasant duty to inform you that it’s a misdemeanor to enter a state prison under false pretenses, and a felony to forge a false name in the visitors’ book. Let’s see you fast-talk your way out of that!”

Miss Withers closed her eyes, having a clear vision of months in a dungeon cell on dry bread and water, surrounded by large slimy rats. As a desperate last resort she had to swallow what was left of her pride and implore the man to check on her bona fides with a long distance call to Spring 7-3100. “You can even reverse the charges,” she offered hopefully as a clincher.

It took some persuading, but finally Warden Boyington put through the call. He listened, relaxed a little, and then passed the instrument across the desk to her. After it was all over he painstakingly hung up the phone again and silently indicated the door. So it was with her ears still burning from the Inspector’s caustic “I told you so!” that Miss Withers gathered together her borrowed and rented finery, clinging to what little dignity was left to her.

Yet she could not resist one last attempt. “Warden,” she said, “as man to man, tell me what you think about that last will and testament of Andrew Rowan’s!”

“I think it’s a practical joke, that’s what I think! Men in the condemned row sometimes develop an odd sense of humor. They love to send comic valentines and doggerel poetry, sometimes to me and sometimes to the police or the district attorney or whoever on the outside they blame for their being here. There’s the old unfunny gag about the convict who had one last little request as they led him to the chair—he said he wanted the warden to sit on his lap.”

She frowned. “And how would you feel about executing an innocent man?”

“I wouldn’t feel any different. I’m only a servant of the people, carrying out orders of the court. Personally I am opposed to capital punishment, and my wife sneaks sedatives in my coffee at dinner every day we have an execution. But I’m not an individual, I’m an instrument.”

“Monsieur de Paris at least wore a black mask!” snapped the schoolteacher, and stalked out of the place.

“Almost!” she sighed dismally to herself as the gates clanged. But *almost* was to no avail, *almost* was but to fail. And with the one question

she had wanted to ask Andy Rowan still unanswered. Eight days from now he might not be alive to answer it. She had no very clear idea of what “the week of September twentieth” really meant, of whether they executed a man on Monday or kept him around until the following Sunday night, but to all intents and purposes it worked out the same. Judging by the progress she had made so far, Rowan would surely die for the Harrington girl’s murder—and the Inspector, the only man in her life even though she detested him one day and mothered him the next, would be pilloried in the press when the news of the will got out.

Immediately after a murder the press was always crying for the blood of the fiend who had perpetrated it, but after somebody had been found guilty and sentenced to death the papers were equally avid to reopen the story with a suggestion that an innocent man had been crushed under the Juggernaut of Justice. And this time, the exception that proves the rule, it might very well be true.

Somewhat baffled, the schoolteacher suffered herself to be borne back to Manhattan in her hired limousine. Then, as they went through the outskirts of Yonkers, she suddenly cried aloud, “Of all the unmitigated *idiots!*”

The driver, having just won a narrow victory in a brush with a truck trying to make a left turn, turned an irate face. “What was that crack, lady?”

“Not you—me!” Miss Withers said hastily. “I forgot about the *money!*”

Which naturally made the man leap to the conclusion that she was trying to get the charges put on the cuff. But the schoolteacher paid him off, adding a very modest tip, outside her little apartment on West 74th, and then rushed inside to divest herself of her borrowed plumage and to make peace with Talleyrand, her French poodle. Talley was a gregarious canine, He liked regular meals and more than food he liked companionship, both of which had been denied him all day long. He welcomed her as one returned from the dead, then rushed to open the closet door. It was one of his self-taught tricks, and he had to turn the knob very carefully with his teeth, but he came triumphantly galumphing back with his leash.

“Very well,” said the schoolteacher. “But it will be a very short walk indeed, for I have work to do. The game is afoot.”

They went once around the block, with Talleyrand pausing now and then to investigate a new smell or to grab up a scrap of secondhand chewing

gum, but as they came back to the familiar steps of the brownstone his mistress paused, tapping her prominent front teeth with a fingernail. "On second thought, perhaps you may as well come with me after all," she decided. "Any woman anchored to a big silly apricot-colored beast like you will be taken at sight for an eccentric of the first water. Which is the exact impression I wish to convey."

Talley vibrated what there was left of his tail, and showed an incredibly red tongue in a doggish laugh. He was a home-loving dog, but not very.

So the retired schoolteacher and her gamboling Standard poodle set out on the quest. It was a search filled with ups and downs, and required the pulling of many strings and the taking of certain liberties with the truth, but she eventually discovered that the present owner of the house on Prospect Way was a Mrs. Emil Fogel. There was a very slim chance indeed that she would have any information about the previous owner, but it was worth a try. At ten o'clock next morning Miss Hildegarde Withers, still complete with dog, went out by appointment to see about buying a house.

The shades were still drawn, the windows still unwashed, but this time the door opened at her first knock. There stood a shapely girl in slacks, whose sultry mouth and bright strawberry hair suggested that somewhere farther downtown, perhaps Times Square, would have been her more natural habitat,

"You're Mrs. Fogel?" demanded the schoolteacher.

"She couldn't make it," the girl said. "I'm her secretary-companion." She looked dubiously down at Talley, who was straining at the leash and curling a black lip to bare one gleaming fang. "Does it bite?" Miss Withers told her of course not. "But it looks as if he's snarling."

"Nonsense, child, he's only chewing leftover gum again. A terrible habit, but I'm thankful he hasn't found out about tobacco. So Mrs. Fogel couldn't keep the appointment, after all? I guess she isn't very anxious to sell the property."

"Oh, but she is! I can give you all the details—"

Miss Withers had already infiltrated the front hallway, furnished sparingly with a telephone table, a hard bench, and an ancient upright victrola, *circa* 1910. It was but a step past heavy draperies into the big living room, whose French doors would have looked out into the garden if

the blinds had been opened. The girl touched a switch and a bowl-shaped chandelier glowed feebly overhead. It was a somber room, filled with ponderous overstuffed chairs and fumed-oak tables, and the gilt-framed portrait on one wall of a scowling man with a toothbrush moustache did not brighten it.

“The asking price is \$28,000-\$30,000 if you take furniture and all.”

“I see,” said Miss Withers, casually ruffling the poodle’s silky top-knot. “But isn’t that a little high? Shouldn’t there be some reduction because of the possibility of the place being haunted? There was a very gruesome murder committed here last year, you know.”

The young woman winced, as if somebody had hit a very sour chord on a piano. Then she said, too quickly, “Oh, *was* there? I hadn’t heard.”

“But surely the present owner must have heard? Perhaps that’s why she’s so anxious to sell?”

“Yes, but—Mrs. Fogel’s only owned the place a short time, and—”

“Fiddlesticks. That ‘For Sale’ sign on the lawn has been weathering there too long for the house to have changed owners very recently. And someone is living here right now, even though the door isn’t opened except by appointment.”

“But Mrs. Fogel—”

“Suppose we stop playing games, and call her by her real name. Mrs. Fogel wouldn’t have any reason for hiding out, but Natalie Rowan might. Ask Mrs. *Rowan* to step in please!”

It was a direct hit, on target. The young eyes were wide as saucers.

“But Mrs. Rowan isn’t—I mean Mrs. *Fogel* isn’t seeing anyone, I mean—”

“You little fool, you don’t know what you mean!” interrupted a hoarse feminine voice from the hallway. The woman who abruptly pushed through the draperies was somewhere in her early forties, though her eyes were older. She was handsome still, yet there was something about her that suggested a comely turtle, a turtle vulnerable and trying hard to pretend it hadn’t been pried out of its shell. She said, “Iris, well excuse you!”

Iris hesitated, shrugged her firm young shoulders, and then walked out of the room in a reasonably good imitation of Miss Tallulah Bankhead making an exit from a stage overcrowded with bit players.

Natalie Rowan said firmly, “I really have no statement whatever for the press.” She pointedly did not sit down.

Miss Withers found that in spite of herself she liked the woman. She was always drawn to lame dogs and beggars, and here was a soul in desperate trouble but keeping a stiff upper lip. Besides, it was a little flattering to be taken for a member of the Fourth Estate. "Goodness, I'm not a reporter," confessed the dowdy middle-aged schoolma'am. "Though I'm being mistaken for one so often these days I'm beginning to think I should take out a card in the Newspaper Guild. Mrs. Rowan—"

"And if you don't mind, I prefer to use the name of my first husband at this time. To avoid as much unpleasant notoriety as possible. You cannot imagine how heartless the photographers and so on can be!"

For all her assurance, the woman was tense and afraid; pulled up taut as an E-string. But Miss Withers was already over her quota on mercy that day. "Never mind your first husband," she probed briskly. "Your present husband has barely seven more days to live."

Another hit, below the belt. Twisting her rings, Natalie whispered, "And—and just what is that to you?"

"I'm glad you asked me that question," said the schoolteacher with a wry smile. "Because I've been asking it of myself for some time, without finding an answer. However, there's always this. Shouldn't any good citizen be interested in preventing a possible miscarriage of justice, especially when the regularly constituted authorities are simply sitting around like bumps on a log?"

It was all a little over Natalie's head. "You're *not* from the police, then?"

"Far from them indeed at the moment," said Miss Withers with a disarming frankness. "Though I am perfectly willing to admit that I may have been of some slight assistance to Inspector Piper once or twice in the past." The schoolteacher introduced herself, and gave a rather sketchy explanation of how she had come to be interested in the affair. She even went so far as to mention the will.

"Andy did *that*?" cried the woman blankly. "I don't understand. Why didn't he leave it to—not that I need the money at all, only—"

"Only your pride has taken a considerable beating already, is that it? Shall we forget that angle for a moment? Your husband has made a will which seems to be aimed at clearing his name of the taint of murder, posthumously. That proves he still loves you."

“It—it does?” Natalie looked doubtful.

“Of course. He wants to have you remember him as an innocent man, as he may well be. But the time to do something about it is now, not after the execution. This is an unusual situation and requires unusual measures, of which I have a complete set or so the Inspector often tells me. To come right down to cases, steps have to be taken—and you have to help. You can’t just sit here and wash your hands of the man you married.”

“Why, I—”

“And I have an idea that, even while you refused to stand by your husband at the trial, you still must have cared enough about him to pay his lawyers—or else he wouldn’t have \$3500 left in his bank account after the costs of the trial and appeal. Wasn’t that because you still had a sneaking fondness for him?”

The woman dropped into a chair, soft and helpless as an opened oyster. She nodded slowly. “Yes,” she whispered, “I arranged for his defense. It was a firm who used to represent my first husband, Emil Fogel.” Her eyes flickered toward the portrait on the wall. “He manufactured cotter pins, you know. I still think the lawyers did their best for Andy, but he was a very noncooperative client. Anyway, I did all I could for him, just as any woman would have.”

“But you didn’t show up to sit beside him at the trial, even though the lawyers must have told you that it might help him considerably. You kept aloof from him all through his ordeal—”

Natalie cried, in a tortured voice, “But he had told me that girl meant nothing to him, that she was only a client, and all the time—” She gulped. “All the time they were having secret trysts right here in our—in my house, where we’d been so happy!”

“My dear woman,” said Miss Withers, “a man may be a liar and a philanderer, but still be innocent of murder.”

There was a silence so complete that the schoolteacher could hear Talley’s soft snoring beside her foot, and the ticking of a little ormolu clock across the room. Then Natalie Rowan drew a deep shuddering breath, like someone about to dive off the high board into cold water. “I know he’s innocent,” she whispered. “Now.”

“So that’s why you went up to the prison to see him? How splendid!” cried Miss Withers cheerily. “Now at long last we have something to go on.

If you've run across anything in the line of proof—”

Natalie hesitated, looking across the room. “I'm afraid it isn't anything the police, or even you, would take any stock in.”

“Don't be too sure,” said Miss Withers, still confident. “In my time I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” Then she added, as the other woman stared at her blankly, “That's from *Alice*.”

“Miss Withers, do you believe in the Hereafter?” Natalie asked suddenly.

“Why—as a member in good standing of the Parkway Unitarian Church, I suppose I must, though I couldn't offer scientific proof of the fact.”

“I mean, do you believe in the supernormal, the supernatural as some call it?”

“Oh, come come! In this day and age, with extrasensory perception and flying saucers and H-bombs, where is one to draw the line? Please come to the point.”

“Well,” said Natalie, “since all this happened I've been dreadfully lonely and miserable. I tried all the isms and numerology and sedatives, but nothing seemed to help. Then a few months ago I remembered that a friend had told me about this wonderful little woman down on Ninety-sixth Street, called Marika. You must understand that she isn't a medium or anything, no fakery about her. She just goes into trances and talks. And she doesn't ever charge anything, though some people leave a free-will offering . . .”

“Oh, *dear!*” murmured Miss Withers, feeling rather as if she had sat herself down in a chair that wasn't there. This sort of nonsense went out with Sir Oliver Lodge and Margery of Boston and the later writings of the bemused Conan Doyle. Nowadays silly women had psychiatry and canasta and existentialism to make fools of themselves about.

Natalie looked at her almost shrewdly. “I can maybe guess what you're thinking. But I'm not exactly the gullible type. In some of her trances Marika told me things about my childhood that she simply couldn't have faked. There was the time with a boy on the high school sleighride—and she also told me about my honeymoon, my second one I mean. I met and married Andy in Paree, you know. Ah, the Tooleries, the Bois, the Champs d'Elysées, Longchamps . . .”

“Champs, champs, champs the bois are marching,” Miss Withers said, almost aloud.

But Natalie Rowan was back on the topic of Marika again. “... and one night a few weeks ago she went into an unusually deep trance and suddenly I heard a different voice coming out of her throat. A voice that I couldn’t possibly be mistaken about, because it was Emil, my first husband. And he told me, plain as the nose on your face, that Andy *didn’t* kill the Harrington girl!”

“Oh,” said Miss Withers flatly.

“Maybe you don’t believe in voices from the Beyond? But I heard what I heard!”

The schoolteacher took it in her stride, and said, “The late Mr. Fogel would hardly be considered a pertinent witness to the murder, would he? Unless, of course, he happened to be haunting this house the evening of the murder.”

“But Marika says that the Departed are now *all* part of the Universal Mind, and know everything that ever was or will be.”

Miss Withers could have pointed out that if this were so, then it was odd that most spirit messages were on the intellectual level of an eight-year-old child. “The dear departed didn’t happen to mention the name of the real murderer?”

Natalie shook her head. “The sitting was over—Marika couldn’t stand any more.”

“And you haven’t been back for another session?”

“I—I’ve been too busy trying to help Andy.”

“I understand. But you really have nothing else, except the message from the grave, to prove your husband’s innocence?”

“Nothing except—well, I talked with him in prison. He finally admitted that his original story about finding the girl’s body planted in his car wasn’t true.”

The schoolteacher sniffled a deep sniff. “Since the police found her fingerprints all over this living room, her cigarettes in the ashtrays, and the marks on the carpet of where her heels had been dragged out of the place after she was dead, it really wasn’t much of an admission, was it?”

Natalie said quickly, “Andy’s telling the truth now, I think. But suppose I start at the beginning. It was a year ago this August, stifling hot

night even up there in the country place near Darien I'd rented for the summer. Andy had been nervous and irritable at dinner, complaining about my cooking more even than usual. I wasn't feeling well, so I went to bed early. I was half-asleep when I heard his car drive away, but I thought he was only going out for a breath of air, so I dozed off. It wasn't until after midnight that I woke and started calling the police and hospitals. I finally decided he was out with that girl, and must have cried myself to sleep. A little before eight in the morning the maid woke me and told me that the police were downstairs. Then I was really frantic. It was hours later when I looked into the wall safe in the library and found he'd taken all the money."

"Money?" Miss Withers perked up her ears. "Your money, or his?"

"Ours," said Natalie loyally. "Around \$5,000 or more. I kept that much around because sometimes in those days I used to go out buying antique furniture and old glass, and money talks louder than checks with those New Englanders. But don't you see? If Andy had had murder in mind when he left he wouldn't have taken the money. He took it along when he went to meet the girl only because he'd decided to pay her off if that was the only way to keep her from carrying out her threats to make trouble. She was bitter about not getting a chance to be Miss America, and she blamed Andy for her failure."

"Just what did go wrong, do you know?"

"The girl had too purple a past, I think. Anyway, she knew that her backers had paid Andy a lot of money to give her a publicity build-up, and she wanted him to kick back part of it. Andy says she threatened to tell me a lot of awful lies about how he had led her astray with liquor and drugs when she was under the age of consent, and how she now was *encientay* ..."

Miss Withers blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, sorry. Since my trip to Paree I just can't seem to help those Gaulish expressions creeping into my speech. I mean, that she was expecting."

"I see." The schoolteacher swallowed hard. "You know, Mrs. Rowan, all this sounds awfully wicked and out of character for a mere child of eighteen."

"She was old in wickedness, that one! Oh, I know. Anyway, according to the story Andy tells now, he says he got into town around ten. He had a sort of date with the girl, at least she'd set that night—"

“A Thursday, was it?”

“Friday. She’d set it as a deadline. Andy was going to phone her from here and ask her to come up for a showdown, paying over the money as a last resort. But when he let himself into the house he turned on the lights and there was the Harrington girl dead in the middle of my Aubusson carpet!” She pointed, dramatically, to a spot near Miss Withers’ foot.

“Quiet, Talley,” ordered the schoolteacher. “This is more important than taking a walk.” She nodded thoughtfully. “Your husband may be telling the truth. Stranger things have happened—”

Words were fairly tumbling out of Natalie now, a torrent unloosed. “He says his first thought was to phone the police, so he rushed back into the hall where the instrument is.” She pointed. “As he was dialing, before they answered, he was hit over the head, and when he came to it was hours later.”

The Withers eyebrows went up suspiciously. “Pray how could he tell that?”

“The body, of course. It had been warm when he first touched her, and now it was cold. He realized that whatever alibi he had once had was gone. Andy lost his head, stripped the body to prevent identification, and somehow got her out into his car. Whoever hit him from behind had taken the envelope with the money, but he was too frightened and excited to discover that then. He drove around the rest of the night trying to find a place to leave her. That’s his story, but—”

“But there’s a catch to it, isn’t there?”

Natalie nodded. “Yes. I do so want to believe him. But you see, the phone here at the house had been disconnected for over a month.”

“The *phone*? That wasn’t what I meant at all. He may not have known. Even if he’d spent several evenings here with the girl they might not have had any reason to use the telephone. As for his call to the police, he may not even have waited for the dial tone, many people don’t when they’re in a hurry. But it was a worse flaw that occurred to me. Granted that his amended story is true, then just how did the *girl—and her murderer*—get inside?”

Natalie Rowan paused to comfort herself with a nip of cognac from the little bar disguised as a rosewood cabinet. “Ask me something hard,” she

said bitterly. "Andy kept silent because he didn't want me to know, but *now* he admits that early in their love affair he'd had a key made for her!"

Miss Withers said softly, "What a tangled web we weave—" She pondered. "If your husband had taken the witness stand and told about the key it might have saved his neck." She looked down at the dog, and then rose suddenly, still talking, and moved across the room to jerk aside the draperies in the doorway. The pretty secretary-companion was lurking there, mouth open and ears almost flapping with curiosity—and some other less obvious emotion too.

"Well!" demanded the schoolteacher with some asperity. "Do you two girls take turns at eavesdropping?"

The young woman flushed beet-red, but Natalie Rowan said easily, "She's interested, naturally. Miss Withers, this is Iris Dunn—"

"How do you—" Then Miss Withers gaped. "Not *the* Iris Dunn, the roommate who identified Midge Harrington's body?"

Natalie nodded. "You may think it odd of me, but I looked her up. Iris has been trying to help me uncover something in the Harrington girl's past which might lead us to the real murderer. Come in, dear, and sit down. Three heads are better than one, I always say. Iris, shake hands with our new ally. She has X-ray eyes."

Miss Withers failed to mention that her hunch about someone being behind the curtain had been based on Talley's looking toward the doorway and wagging his tail. Wasn't it Sherlock Holmes who always explained his deductions only to have Dr. Watson say, "Oh, yes, of course, anybody could have seen that!"?

The schoolteacher listened patiently while Natalie Rowan, warmed a little by the brandy, went on to disclose the details of a pitiful and seemingly abortive campaign, two lone women engaged in a desperate lost cause. "But after I knew Andy was innocent I had to do something!" the woman said. "You too must believe him innocent, Miss Withers, or you wouldn't be here."

"I certainly feel that a man in Rowan's position is entitled to the benefit of the doubt," admitted the schoolteacher with native caution. "And even Inspector Piper admits there are weak links in the chain of evidence. What do you think of it all, Miss Dunn?"

Iris shrugged her shoulders, and smiled a surprisingly frank, little-girl smile. "I'm only here because Mrs. Rowan is paying me," she admitted. "And show business is tougher than usual this season. Not, of course, that I couldn't have got an ingénue lead with some road company, only—" She stopped and smiled as if an extremely pleasant thought had just flickered through her mind. Then she said abruptly, "About the murder, I know from nothing."

"But she's been very helpful, anyway," Natalie said firmly. "Now isn't it obvious that if Andy isn't guilty then he was framed by somebody out of Midge's past who wanted her dead and was willing to let an innocent man suffer for it?"

"Midge was hell on men, anybody's men," Iris put in suddenly. "You couldn't let her get a whiff of your date's shaving lotion or she'd try to climb in his pocket."

"I see," said Miss Withers. "Very enlightening. But apart from Andy Rowan, of course, just who were the men in Midge Harrington's life?"

Iris studied her fingernails. "During the five months we roomed together Midge wasn't exactly the confiding type about her romances. She had lots of dates, but not many men she went out with more than once or twice. I've told Mrs. Rowan all I can."

"For this sort of investigation," the schoolteacher admitted, "one should really have professional assistance."

"But I did go to one of the best private agencies in town," Natalie put in. "They said they would take my money if I insisted, but it was a lost cause."

"The masculine mind," sighed Miss Withers. "So you two started out alone."

"I'm afraid we haven't got very far. After over a year, the trail is cold. Iris and I are about at the end of our rope."

"No clues, no leads at all?" pressed the schoolteacher hopefully.

Natalie said, "When Midge Harrington was sixteen she was named correspondent in a divorce case brought by the wife of her dancing teacher, a man named Nils Bruner. A year later she got mixed up with a swing trumpet-player known as Riff Sprott, who took veronal when she walked out on him, but he didn't die."

"They stomach-pumped him!" put in Iris helpfully.

“Nils Bruner and Riff Sprott,” mused Miss Withers. “Something to go on.”

“You won’t go very far,” Iris said. “When Midge was through with a man she was through. I don’t think she ever saw Bruner after his wife got the divorce—she never mentioned his name when I was rooming with her. And Riff Sprott got tired of calling her up about six months before she died. Somebody said he even made an honest woman out of the canary who sang with his band. So—”

Miss Withers said, “Now don’t let’s be so quick to eliminate suspects. We must explore a little further. By the way, who was backing Midge in her fling at being Miss Brooklyn?”

“Just some old stuffy club,” Iris offered.

“The Bigger Flatbush Business Boosters,” Natalie elaborated.

“But a club is only a group of men,” the schoolteacher said sharply. “And men are putty in the hands of a beautiful animal like Midge Harrington. Now wasn’t there one who took a special interest in promoting her career?” But Iris only shook her head.

“I happened to see one of the club checks one day when I was in my husband’s office,” said Natalie. “It was countersigned by a man named Zotos, George Zotos.”

“Oh, *him!*” Iris laughed. “Old Georgie-Porgie, Midge always called him. He was harmless as a cocker spaniel. Besides, he was old—over forty at least.”

Miss Withers pointed out that there is no age limit on the sowing of wild oats. “We must include Mr. Zotos in our list. Bruner, Sprott, and Zotos. Too bad we can’t get the spook of Midge Harrington to point an ectoplasmic finger at the right one.”

“I’m afraid Marika can’t guarantee any *such* results . . .” Natalie began.

“I was entirely serious, though perhaps Marika will be helpful to us at some stage of the investigation, if only to throw a scare into the suspects. The murderer, of course, thinks he’s got away with it, and that when Rowan pays the penalty it will be a perfect murder. But he still must be jittery. I wonder if this might not be the time to try psychological methods? Suppose someone were to call on each of our suspects on some pretext or other and then suddenly mention the dead girl’s name? The killer might give himself away by his reaction.”

Natalie choked over another brandy. "What? Oh, I could never get by with anything like that, I'm no actress."

"I'm an actress," Iris admitted. "At least I'm a member of Equity. But don't forget I saw Midge in the morgue. Not for all the tea in China would I risk my lily-white neck by snuggling up to her killer." She shuddered elegantly.

Miss Withers arose, then stood bracing herself against the pull of Talleyrand, who was as usual eager to be off. "That rather leaves it up to me, does it not?"

Mrs. Rowan breathlessly announced that she would gladly pay a reward of ten, no *twenty* thousand dollars to anyone who would get to the truth of the matter!

"I'll do my best," promised the schoolteacher. "Not for the money—I still have my amateur standing. But I have an inbred weakness for longshots and lost causes. And justice, even in these worsening times, is justice." She marched out of the room, dog and all, to what seemed the distant roll of drums and fanfare of trumpets. The outer door slammed.

The two women sat a little dazed in their chairs. "Golly!" exploded Iris. "I saw it but I don't believe it! That incredible dog with a hair-ribbon in its bangs—and her hat, like a kid's kite caught on a telephone pole!"

"It's what's under the hat that counts," said Natalie Rowan thoughtfully. "She may seem to you a preposterous character, but I've heard that she can wind that Inspector at Centre Street around her little finger. And somehow having her just walk in here out of thin air and offer to help, just when things seemed so terribly hopeless ... Do you believe in angels?"

"Sure, the Broadway kind. They pinch you when you're waiting for your entrance cues ... Mrs. Rowan, should you? That'll be your fourth brandy this morning!"

"I'm not having a drink, dear, I'm pouring the rest of it down the sink. Because somehow I think I'm going to need my wits about me from now on."

Out in the foyer Miss Hildegarde Withers, who had slammed the door from the *inside* with the idea of doing a little eavesdropping of her own, nodded approvingly and then slipped out into the sunlight, letting the door close silently behind her.

“We boil at different degrees.”

—*Emerson*

### 3.

“GIVE A DOG A BAD NAME,” observed Miss Withers over the breakfast coffee, “and he may live up to it. Or a man either.” She had been musing over the amazing number of famous murderers who had names befitting their deeds —Cordelia Botkin, for instance. And Martin Thorn and Augusta Nack, to say nothing of Herman Mudgett, Ivan Poderjay, and Dr. Crippen ...

Her companion, seated on the opposite chair, looked wistfully at the last piece of buttered toast, and then gave a faint wordless cry of anguish as she spread it with marmalade and bit into a corner.

“Since this present puzzle has to be attacked with a shot in the dark anyway, perhaps it wouldn’t be a bad idea to play hunches? The only available suspects are Bruner, Sprott, and Zotos. Somehow I have a fancy for the name of Riff Sprott, as a potential murderer, I mean.”

Talleyrand, the big apricot poodle, sulked in silence. He had never accepted the dictum that grown dogs eat only one meal, and that at night. His hot brown eyes begrimed his mistress every bite she took, and with the inborn histrionic talents of one descended from a long line of theatrical and circus performers, he pantomimed famishment.

To no avail. His mistress—who had inherited him along with a lot of other trouble from one of her previous attempts at minding the Inspector’s business—was intently studying a weekly magazine of theatrical news, couched in what seemed to her almost a foreign language. Now and then she stopped to commit some phrase to memory. Noting her preoccupation, Talley reached out with elaborate caution and almost but not quite closed his whiskery jaws on the topmost lump in the sugar bowl.

“Bad for the teeth!” Miss Withers snapped, without looking up. “Get down at once.” Talley gave her a reproachful stare, then let his furry body slide off the chair. Then he had a mercurial change of mood and danced off hopefully toward the hall closet.

“You’ve already had your walk,” she told him firmly. “I’m afraid this is one excursion on which you’d only be in the way. I want to appear as Nemesis, not Mother Goose.” She put on her second-best hat, the one the Inspector always said resembled a runner-up float in the Rose Bowl parade,

and then changed it for a more rakish bandanna. She would have liked to try the effect of a beanie, sweater and skirt, and bobby socks, but perhaps that would have been overdoing it. Starting out, she turned back and carefully draped a length of light chain around the door of the refrigerator. "Just in case," she told the dog, "you are tempted to fall from grace again."

When she was gone the big poodle made a detailed prospecting trip underneath all the table tops, but it had been some time since the retired schoolteacher had had a visit from any of her former pupils, and nobody had parked any gum. The day, for Talley at least, had got off on the wrong foot.

His mistress, however, felt a surge of hopeful confidence as she came out into the bright fall sunshine, heading briskly over toward the Park and then southward toward the theatrical district and Times Square. She had less than a week in which to perform a minor miracle—but as she reminded herself, the whole world was created in that same space of time.

But musicians, she soon discovered, are strictly nocturnal creatures, like bats and owls and garden snails. Riff Sprott was supposed to inhabit Suite 14B at the Dube Hotel, but wasn't home. It was not until late that afternoon that Miss Withers gingerly descended a long stair and poked her inquisitive nose into a clammy little basement just off Seventh Avenue, whose blind neon signs proclaimed it to be The Grotto Club. It still smelled of yestereve's stale liquor and tobacco, of expensive perfume and of food, and even—she fancied—of roaches. In the deserted bar a melancholy youth left off wiping out glasses to wave a grayish towel in the direction she was to follow. Not that she needed help, for the rich and dissonant polyphony blasting forth suddenly from the inner room was guidance enough. It sounded to the schoolteacher about as harmonious as the scraping of a fingernail on a blackboard, but she marched on.

As she gingerly made her way toward the musicians' stand past tiny tables covered with up-ended chairs and across a dance floor about the size of her living room rug at home, she noted that there was a bored, softly plump red-head leaning against the piano and beating time to the music with heavily enamelled claws. The five men were informally clad, but the girl wore a green evening gown in spite of the fact that it was barely twilight outside—a gown with nothing much before and rather less than half of that behind, as the song went.

The man with the trumpet—Miss Withers would have called it a “cornet”—was in his early thirties, a wiry nervous chap who wasn’t bad looking if your taste ran to a complexion like a flounder’s belly, a Hollywood shirt of many colors, and a dab of lip whisker. But he put down his horn with weary politeness when he saw that he had a visitor. “Take ten, boys,” he told the others, and stepped down from the stand with a gold-toothy smile. “What’s on your mind, sister?”

Miss Withers took a deep breath and sang out cheerily, “Hiyah, Riff! Autograph me one, will ya? I may look like a square, but I’m not long underwear. I’m a gal that’s strictly in step with hep, yep. You know, you’ve got one of the hottest five-man combos along the alley, and I just dropped in to see if you’ve grooved any new platters lately so I can add ’em to my album of real jumping jive!”

They were all staring at her, and the man with the tenor sax who had been improvising softly suddenly blew a shrill squeak. Riff Sprott backed warily away. “Beg pardon, sister? Come again, and cut out double-talk.”

“Oh, dear!” The maiden schoolteacher shook her head sorrowfully. “You mean I haven’t got the *patois* right, even after studying *Down Beat* and *Weekly Variety* for hours?”

“The act sounds queerer than a three-dollar bill,” Sprott told her. Then he sighed and held out his hand. “Okay, give me the summons and let me get back to rehearsal.”

“Heavens, *I’m* not a process server,” admitted Miss Withers. “I only dropped by, Mr. Sprott, to see if you’ve heard the news about Midge Harrington?”

The man gasped as if he had been kicked in the stomach by a sharp-toed shoe, and his face paled to a leprous green. Then he grasped Miss Withers by the arm and started walking her hastily back across the dance floor, out of earshot of the others. “You said *Harrington*?” He swallowed. “But Midge is *dead*!”

“I know. But the investigation into her murder is being reopened.”

His hand tightened on her arm, but he only said, “Oh?”

“Friend of yours, wasn’t she?”

“Look,” said Biff Sprott. “It’s no particular secret that Midge and I were an item in Winchell at one time, and when she gave me the air I was slap-happy enough to take a whole bottle of goof-pills. A bellboy found me

and the Rescue Squad gave me the works and I didn't start pushing up daisies after all. But that's water over the dam, lady. I'd like very much to forget it."

"Sometimes the dead won't stay forgotten. You admit you knew Midge well at one time. I'm not asking out of idle curiosity, but—what was she really like?"

His eyes were suddenly far away, and there was an odd twist to his mouth. Yes, indeed, I could see him as a murderer, Miss Withers thought. The nympholept type, in love with an ideal of womanhood that never existed and never could exist. A jumble of nerves, too—though there was surprising strength in his pale, slender hands. She would have a black-and-blue mark on her arm tomorrow.

"You want to know what was she like?" he said softly. "Midge was—she was like a phrase of music, just a few bars by itself, that can't be set to words. A hunk of melody that gets under your skin and you can't help humming it all day long till you don't know if you hate it or love it. And you can't decide whether you heard it somewhere or just made it up, only it's unfinished. Maybe if you're in the business you even try to build it into a song, but you never can."

"'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter . . .'" quoted Miss Withers.

"Therefore ye soft pipes . . ." Sprott blinked. "Poetry, yet! They beat enough of that into me in school. Anyway, Midge Harrington was a lot of girl, and all of it beautiful. You can carve that on her tombstone."

"But a pretty girl is just like a melody, is that what you mean?"

Sprott was fast regaining his self-control. "That's a moldy old Berlin number."

"Sorry. But you and Midge Harrington were very much in love, weren't you? What happened?"

"Sure, I had it bad. I don't know what business it is of yours, but I don't mind telling you that the only thing wrong was that she wasn't enough in love with me. Maybe if I'd met her earlier, before some other guy put her heart in a deep-freeze, it might have been different."

Miss Withers nodded sympathetically. "It has been said that only once does a woman love a man, after that she is in love with love. But who was this other man, this ghost who came between you? It wasn't Nils Bruner?"

“Bruner? You mean the dance guy?” Sprott made a wry face. Then he reached into the pocket of his rainbow-hued shirt and took out a single cigarette, which he set afire. Drawing in the smoke as if he needed it, he eyed her with a cold and suspicious, eye. “How would I know? Who are you anyway, and why are you putting your five cents in?”

Miss Withers told him her name. “I’m just a friend of Inspector Piper’s. Sometimes he discusses his cases with me. That’s how I learned that they are beginning to think at Headquarters that they have the wrong man locked up for Midge’s murder.”

Sprott lighted his cigarette all over again, though it seemed to be burning well. “What? Who says so? That guy Rowan is guilty.”

“No, innocent. I have it on excellent authority. It’s out of this world.”

“Huh?”

“In more ways than one. As a matter of fact, all of this started because of a spirit message received through a medium or clairvoyant or whatever you want to call her—somebody named Marika, up on Ninety-sixth Street.”

“Are you kidding?” Sprott demanded.

“Not in the least. It’s too bad the woman didn’t stay in the trance long enough to get the name of the real murderer, but at least she has touched off a chain reaction that even has upset the official minds at Centre Street.”

He said, a little cautiously, “But what has all this got to do with me?”

“Nothing, of course!” said the schoolteacher warmly. “As I told my friend the Inspector, you’re a well-known artist. I’ve listened to all your broadcasts, and I have some of your records. *Slew-Foot Boogie* and *Her Tears Flowed Like Wine* are my special favorites. It’s ridiculous to suspect you. And I think it’s perfectly silly assigning detectives to shadow every step you take and—but I shouldn’t have let that out, should I?”

Sprott studied his cigarette as if it were some new invention, unique and puzzling. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again.

“Of course,” Miss Withers wickedly continued, “you did react and turn somewhat pale when I mentioned the girl’s name ...”

“And why *wouldn’t* I?” cried Riff. “You went and mentioned it right in front of my wife, who happens to be standing over there by the piano waiting to run through her number.” He looked back over his shoulder. “We been married sixteen months, but she has the idea that I’m still carrying the

torch for Midge Harrington. Just a mention of that name and Chloris hits the ceiling. She'll—"

"Come, come, young man," interrupted Miss Withers. "Don't try to tell me that your wife is still jealous of a girl who's been dead since more than a year ago?"

He nodded wearily. "Lady, she'd even be jealous of you! So please climb back on your broomstick and fly away home, will you?" Politely but firmly he edged her through the bar to the door, and she heard the lock click behind her as a signal that the interview was ended.

Miss Withers climbed back up to the street and then paused to smooth her ruffled feathers. She stood amid signs advertising "Riff Sprott and His Funetic Five, with Chloris Klee" and a color photograph, considerably larger than life, of a curvesome female bearing some resemblance to the girl by the piano. Chloris had her mouth open and seemed about to bite the microphone off its stand.

The schoolteacher turned her back on this overpowering exhibit and took a small notebook from her capacious handbag. She wrote: "*Riff Sprott, The Grotto Club. Big reaction, dubious explanation involving wife Chloris' supposed jealousy. Admits he carried torch for Midge and that he loved her more than she did him. Find out when Chloris started singing with band.*"

Things, decided Miss Withers, were definitely looking up. She hoped fervently that it really *was* Riff Sprott, not only because he had a name befitting a strangler, but because of that crack about the broomstick. If he did have a guilty conscience, her hint that the police were shadowing him ought to give him something to worry about.

But this was no time for snap judgments, nor to let her intuition have its head. There were other candidates ...

Nils Bruner was next on her list. Dancing-masters keep more regular hours than musicians, but are considerably more difficult to locate, due to an occupational tendency to pull up stakes and move to new and more fertile fields when the going gets tough. The studios in Flatbush were closed and had been for rent since last October. No forwarding address.

But Miss Withers had access to certain information not available to the ordinary amateur detective and sometimes not even to the police. During her twenty-odd years at P.S. 38, generations of grubby urchins had passed through her tutelage to graduate and eventually take their place in the world

outside, and with as many as possible of them she kept in touch via Christmas cards. At moments like this she could call on a far-flung organization, just as Sherlock Holmes did on his Irregulars. Some of her boys and girls had risen to positions of importance and influence.

It was little Willie Prjbwski, one in difficulties with third-grade arithmetic but now a bald, bespectacled auditor with one of the public utility companies, who called her back that same evening with the desired information.

So it was that next forenoon—Rowan now had but five days left—Miss Withers marched up two flights of stairs above a neighborhood drugstore in the rabbit warrens of the Grand Concourse region, and rapped sharply on a door bearing the legend: “New Elite School of Professional Tap, Spanish and Rhythm.”

No answer. She rapped again and then entered a tiny reception room, sparsely furnished and of no interest whatever. But from interior regions she could hear soft strains of music. She opened the inner door and peered in.

She saw part of a long, bare hall, with a practice bar under the windows and a full-length mirror opposite. A ponderous, elderly automatic phonograph was grinding out *The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi*, and in the center of the polished floor a tall, fair man was dancing. He danced all by himself, except for the two enormous fans of tinted ostrich feather, and he wore only an undershirt and a pair of Paris-green slacks.

“Whoops!” she gasped, and then “Excuse *me*!” But the solitary dancer was so engrossed that he did not turn his head. She suddenly realized that this was no pixie drag act. Apart from the soft, sinuous femininity of the gestures there was nothing effeminate about him at all. “*Pssst!*” she whispered.

The man turned, stared at her with china-blue eyes, and then said without breaking the rhythm, “All right, come on in if you want to join the class. There’s extra fans in the corner over there.”

Somebody giggled, and Miss Withers stepped inside far enough to see that there were three scantily clad young women, completely equipped with ostrich feathers, facing the teacher and trying to copy his technique.

The music suddenly ended, and he said, “Get it, girls? The whole thing is control. And lag on the beat. As you turn, make ‘em think you won’t get the fans in place at the right time, only pick it up one, two—*three!* See?” He

looked at his watch. "Okay, it's eleven-thirty. Only work on this at home during the week, all of you. And Irma, quit dieting or nobody will care whether *you* shake a fan or not."

The girls scampered noisily toward a dressing room, and Nils Bruner came over to Miss Withers, dropping the fans and mopping his forehead. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I want to take a dancing lesson," she said. "But not fan-dancing." As she spoke she could see herself in the full mirror on the opposite wall, and realized how silly her prepared opening must sound.

But Bruner did not smile. "Of course," he said. "A private ballroom lesson. The waltz?"

He was so fair that he seemed almost an albino. No trace of the pomade, the long sideburns, that she had expected. Indeed, if this tall, strange young man ever had five o'clock shadow it must look like frost or perhaps mold on his decided chin.

"Yes, I think the waltz," Miss Withers admitted.

He looked sad. "Shall I make an appointment for one day next week?"

"You couldn't possibly make it today?" Next week would be too late, at least for Andy Rowan.

Bruner looked sadder still. "I am sorry. But honestly, I'm booked solid. In a few minutes I have a class in tap and soft-shoe—a roomful of screaming teen-agers."

"Skip it," the schoolteacher said abruptly. "Mr. Bruner, I'll break down and confess that I really didn't come here for a lesson, but on business. Do you remember a girl who studied with you a couple of years ago, named Midge Harrington?"

The pale lashes flicked only once, then he said quickly, "Of course! Such a *tragic* end! The girl had great talent if she'd only stuck to her dancing. Such personality, such beauty . . ."

"Do you happen to have a professional photograph of her around anywhere?"

This time the hesitation was noticeably longer. "I might have," Bruner said. "Only it's autographed, and it has certain sentimental associations. I suppose you want it for publication in some newspaper? Could you go as high as fifty dollars?"

Miss Withers said, "No, not a newspaper." She thought she could go as high as twenty-five. After some haggling they settled, and she received a large studio portrait of a tall young woman in heavy make-up and ornate Spanish costume, clicking castanets and grinning like La Argentinita. "*To mio maestro Nils Bruner who taught me all I know, Midge,*" was scrawled at the bottom in a round, childish hand. Somehow that unformed, girlish writing touched the schoolteacher's sympathies as not even the grim morgue photograph had been able to do.

Bruner cocked his head wisely. "You'll want a story to go with the picture, I suppose?"

"Why, yes," Miss Withers admitted. "Anything that will shed light on her character might help."

He lowered his voice. "Of course you've looked it up, and you know that she was named in my wife's divorce suit. For no real reason at all, I assure you, except that Virla wanted to hurt me professionally as much as possible. As a matter of fact, no dancing teacher should ever have a wife. Because in my profession once in a blue moon you run into real talent, a personality destined for stardom and bright lights. It is almost impossible to develop that talent, to help the rosebud open into full bloom, without appearing at least to have a personal interest. People misunderstand."

"You weren't in love with her, then?"

"*Not for publication,*" said Nils Bruner quickly. "But you experts understand how to write such things without—without making trouble, shall I say? Anyway, it's the truth that I never saw Midge after the divorce, though I always knew that if she struck it rich she'd pay me for the private lessons I had to give her on credit. She never had any money, you know. No family or anything."

"An orphan—or did she get born in a seashell, like the other Venus?"

"I think she had a mother," he said slowly. "Supposed to have been a Floradora girl once, but you can't prove it by me. Anyway, she boarded out the kid with some people in Brooklyn Heights, and after a while she quit sending money and Midge was on her own."

Miss Withers agreed that this was all very sad, but the interview seemed to be getting off the track. "It's too bad you didn't marry the child," she said. "Midge was very much in love with you, wasn't she?"

The pale blue eyes clouded. "No," he said, "she wasn't. Something always got in the way. I always thought it must have been some man she couldn't forget, somebody she met before she was my pupil."

Reenter the ghost-lover motif. "I see," said Miss Withers. "A grand passion before she was sixteen? Dear, dear."

There was a slight interruption while the three pupils, now in street clothes and carrying little satchels, said their goodbyes and wended their way homeward. But the schoolteacher still lingered, vaguely dissatisfied.

"Anything else I can do to help?" said Nils Bruner. "A photograph of me, for instance? I don't know what kind of feature your magazine plans, but if you can get in the name of the studio somewhere—"

"I'm not with a magazine either," Miss Withers told him. "I wouldn't put it past *Life* or *Look* or *Peep* to dig up the Midge Harrington case at this time, but I'm not a ghoul, I'm only a private investigator without portfolio. I supposed you'd heard that the police have the wrong man in prison and that they're reopening the investigation into her murder?"

Bruner very softly said something in a foreign language, but she could translate his expression. She suddenly realized that she was alone with a powerful and very angry man, a man who had talked too much in the hope of chiseling a little extra publicity and now deeply regretted it. He seemed to be coming a little apart at the seams ...

"Probably there's nothing in it after all," she said quickly. "The whole thing originated in a spirit message, you know. Some medium named Marika down on Ninety-sixth Street came up with word that Rowan is innocent, but *so far* she hasn't named the real killer."

"The police—they take the word of such a person?" he asked thickly.  
"Only because there seems to be corroborative evidence. Thank you for your help, Mr. Bruner. And of course for the picture." She beat a speedy retreat. Safe and sound in the street again, she took out her notebook and wrote: "*Nils Bruner, Crotona Building. No reaction, much too casual. Denies affair with Midge but admits she owed him money. Svengali angle? Where was Virla Bruner that night?*"

Somewhat weary with her labors, she popped into the drugstore for a cup of tea and a sandwich. She had to admit that Bruner seemed every whit as promising a suspect as had the trumpet-player.

The odds were even better, she realized half an hour later. Because from her perch at the soda fountain she could see the entrance to the stairway leading up to the dance studio, and no horde of teen-agers came swarming in for their class in tap and soft-shoe. It was twelve o'clock—and then twelve-thirty. Nobody went into the place at all except one precocious little miss in a tight sweater, with a basket of black curls and the map of Ireland on her face. She paused in the doorway to smear on fresh mouth then ran up the stairs three steps at a time.

"So!" said Miss Withers. She lurked around for another half-hour or so, but nobody came down the stairs.

"I might as well try to decide it the way my pupils would, with eeny, meeny, miny, mo," she said to herself as she headed toward the bus. "But just to play fair I suppose I have to include George Zotos, the sole remaining nomination."

There was one good thing about a manufacturer, from her point of view. He had to stay with his factory. But, of course, Mr. Zotos was bound to be a let-down, after the others.

It was a block-long building, grimy with soot, located in the wrong part of Long Island City. The reek of overpowering sweetness, of vanilla and chocolate and cinnamon, was almost unbearable half a block away, and by the time Miss Withers had talked her way inside the place she made up her mind never to eat another pastry as long as she lived.

The cream-puff king sat in a big chair behind a big desk in an office whose walls were covered with convention pictures and framed membership certificates. The man himself was soft and round, with dark curly hair thinning on top and moist brown eyes. Iris had been right, he was rather like a cocker spaniel. But it was a wary spaniel, not sure whether to growl or wag its tail.

Her previous efforts to pass as a hep-cat and as a student of Terpsichore having met with no marked success, this time Miss Withers laid her cards on the table. "Mr. Zotos," she informed the very bewildered little man, "I've come to see what you have to say, if anything, about the news that the police have a new lead on the murder of Miss Midge Harrington."

"Who?" he muttered.

"Midge Harrington, the girl you tried to help get to be Miss Brooklyn last year. She was murdered, remember?"

Then she saw that tears were welling out of his brown eyes, big tears that ran unashamed down his plump cheeks.

“Yes,” he whispered. “I remember. But why do you come to me?”

“Because I’m a relative of hers,” said Miss Withers without shame.

(After all, were we not all cousins after Adam, or the apes?) “I’m calling on everyone who knew her, to help the police. After all they haven’t much to go on—the whole thing was reopened by an odd clause in somebody’s will, and by a supposed spirit message—”

“A—a spirit message? I don’t understand.”

“Nor do I. But this Marika person, over on Ninety-sixth Street, got a message saying that the man the police arrested and convicted is innocent. And there seems to be some corroborative evidence. I’d like to see justice done, and Midge avenged.”

“Yes,” he said softly, still not using a handkerchief. “Midge Harrington was the only girl—” He gulped. “She’s gone, and that’s all that matters. But she was the only woman I ever could have loved, you see. I understood that they got the man who did it, but if they’re reopening the case the police probably know what they’re doing. If I can help in any way—” He brightened, and reaching into his desk. “Would you like to see something?”

And so for half an hour Miss Withers had to admire his scrapbooks, containing every line of the publicity Rowan had planted for Midge, every bathing-suit picture, every simpering posed portrait. The prize shot, on a page of its own, was one of Georgie-Porgie Zotos himself presenting Midge with a corsage of orchids at some luncheon affair, and staring up at her as a little boy might peer into a toyshop window. “I even have a privately-made recording of her voice, singing ‘*It’s Cold Outside*,’ ” he went on.

“Sometimes I play it on my little portable. What a woman!” George Zotos sighed, shaking his head.

“You loved her, didn’t you—very much?”

“What man wouldn’t?” he asked, surprised at the question.

“She loved you too?”

Zotos blinked. “Of course not! Miss Harrington was—well, I always felt that she was unapproachable, untouchable. Sort of as if she always really belonged to someone else, somebody she met or dreamed about years before.”

“Here we go again,” said Miss Withers under her breath.

“She wasn’t like anybody else,” said the man with painful seriousness. “She was a work of art, she was the frosting on the cake. If what you say is true, and the man who did that awful thing is still at large, I only wish I could get him alone for five minutes . . .”

“To smother him to death with cream-puffs?” Miss Withers said, but not aloud. She stood up. “Thank you, Mr. Zotos. Here’s my card, and if you think of anything that might shed light on the case, do call me.”

“Of course. If there’s anything I can do—”

“There is one thing. Can you tell me just why Midge Harrington’s dreams of being Miss Brooklyn, and trying out for the Miss America crown, couldn’t come true?”

“Why—” He hesitated.

“Was it her purple past, whatever that means?”

“I wouldn’t say that, I wouldn’t say that at all. It’s just that the committee behind the Atlantic City beauty pageant has certain rigid rules and specifications, which are naturally subscribed to by the local and state committees. We were advised that our candidate, Miss Harrington, was ineligible. Some busybody had written a letter—”

“Perhaps it was because Midge was living at the Rehearsal Arts Club over in Manhattan instead of here in Brooklyn?”

“Perhaps,” agreed Zotos doubtfully.

Miss Withers headed for the door. “One last word, Mr. Zotos. When the police come around questioning you, you needn’t mention that I dropped by. Sometimes they get annoyed when I try to interfere.”

“Surely,” he said, from very far away. As she went out of the office she heard him hastily putting away the scrapbooks. On the subway back to town, still feeling wrung out like a towel, Miss Withers wrote: *“George Zotos, a sticky Caliban. Does each man kill the thing he loves? Anyway he still loves her. A longshot bet.”*

As the schoolteacher neared home she felt an increasing uneasiness of spirit. When he heard how she had spent the last two days the Inspector was sure to accuse her of hurling monkeywrenches into the machinery again. And it was more than probable that Talleyrand, the other male in her life, had amused himself by making an apple-pie bed in her room or otherwise disgracing himself during her long absence. As she came up the street she had vague but unpleasant premonitions of disaster. She resented them all

the more because this was the time when her fabled intuition was supposed to be at work, her mental shortcuts which had sometimes led her to the correct answer without going through all the intermediate stages. Of course, she was well aware that anything perceived intuitively must afterward be checked with reason ...

She hurried up the stairs and put her key in the lock. At least Talley wasn't howling with loneliness, the soft little howls that drive other tenants slowly crazy. In fact, the big poodle was in his favorite spot on top of the closed cover of the kitchen stove, sleeping peacefully.

The telephone was off the hook, a sure indication that it had rung and rung until in desperation the dog had pawed it into silence. Before taking off her coat and hat she sat down and called the Inspector, but he was not at home and he was not at Centre Street.

"Is he out on a murder case?" she demanded of the sergeant.

"Ma'am, I don't know."

"And if you *did* know you wouldn't tell me!" She hung up, rather abruptly. Then she put murder out of her mind and prepared a somewhat sketchy meal for herself and the poodle, settling down afterward with a copy of *War and Peace*, a classic she was always beginning and never able to finish. Tonight was no exception. A little after ten-thirty, with the phone still stubbornly refusing to ring, she got out the phone book, which at times constituted her favorite reading material.

There it was, like an answer to prayers. "Marika—West 96th ..." Inspired, she dialled the number. Almost instantly there was an answer, a man's voice heavy with caution. "Yes?"

"I'd like to speak with Marika, please."

"Who's calling?"

"I don't know that it matters, but my name is Hildegarde Withers. I want to make an appointment ..."

There were muffled male voices and then somebody else took over. "Hildegarde!" roared the Inspector, "what in Judas Priest's name do you mean calling at a time like this, and how'd you find out about it?"

"I really did want an appointment," said Miss Withers. "With Marika, not with you."

"Get out your ouija board then," he told her. "Because the dame they call Marika is right here on the floor beside me, colder than Kelsey!"

“Oh, my prophetic soul! She was strangled with that same necklace, wasn’t she, Oscar?”

“That she was not. Somebody bashed out her brains with her own crystal ball.”

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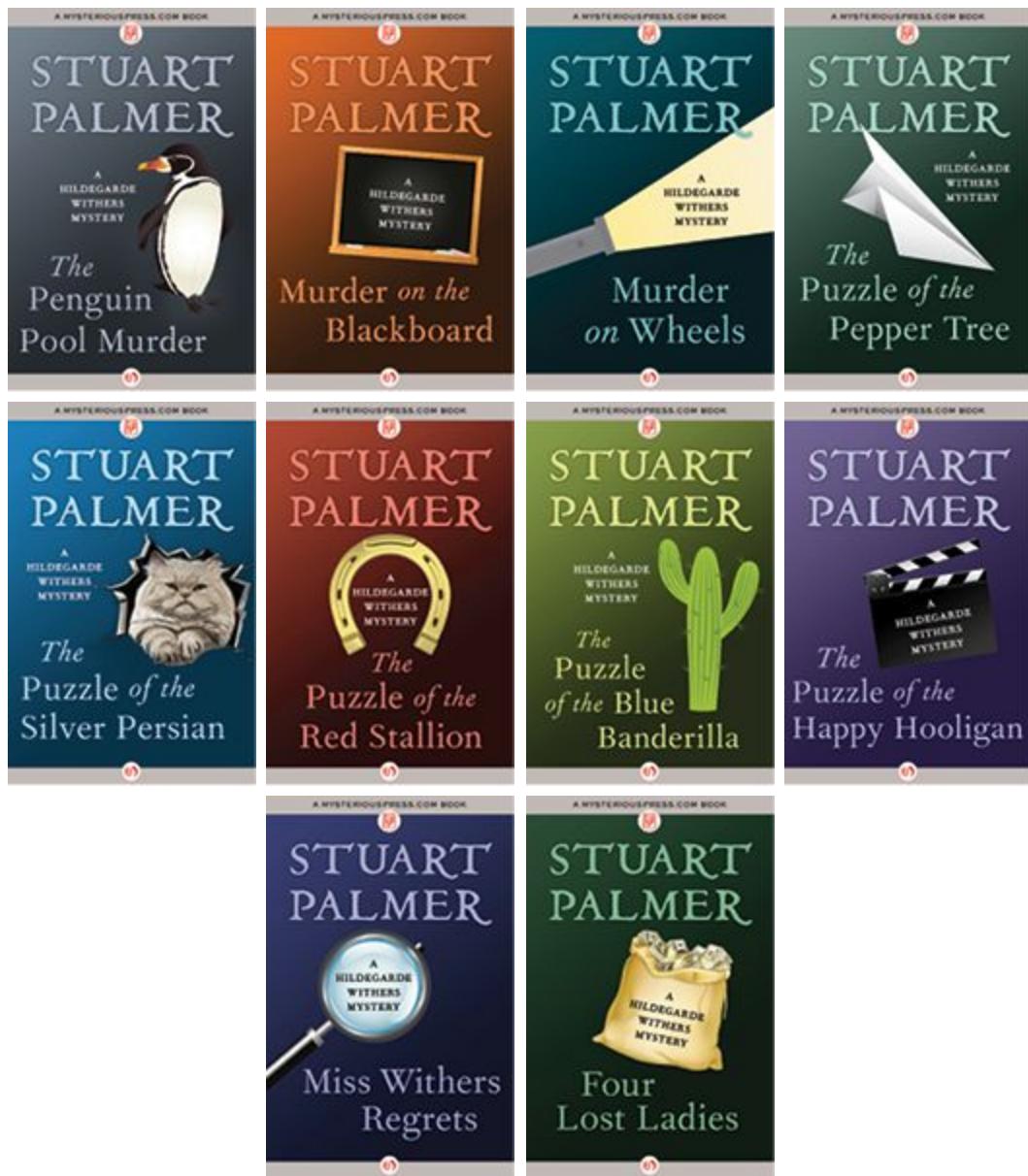
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